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The Build it NOW! Plan

by Larry Agran, former Irvine Mayor

By a 4-to-1 vote, on May 12th the Irvine City Council adopted the citizens' **Build the Great Park Veterans Cemetery Initiative**, finally selecting a site for what will become the state-built, state-operated Southern California Veterans Memorial Park & Cemetery.

The long-promised project has been restored to the 125-acre, City-owned "ARDA" site at the Great Park — the site that was initially approved by the Irvine City Council, the State of California (including the Department of Veterans Affairs, known as CalVet), and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs in the period 2014-2016.



In adopting the Build the Great Park Veterans Cemetery Initiative, the City Council not only zoned the entire 125-acre ARDA site for memorial park and cemetery purposes; it facilitated the transfer of the property to the State, possibly by the end of this year, under the terms of State Acquisition and Transfer Agreements that include the Irvine zoning provisions in the Initiative. Among these zoning provisions is Section 9-51-6, sub-section Q.-ix (underlined on page 30 of the Initiative), which is clear and direct in specifying Irvine voters' land-use expectations for the ARDA site:

Development District 9: This district is the location for a veterans memorial park and cemetery. This district will be the exclusive location for a veterans cemetery. There will be no residential uses and only minor institutional or commercial uses ancillary and related to cemetery use, such as a bookstore or gift shop offering commemorative items or veterans-oriented materials, administrative buildings, or community meeting rooms. Any new structures at the site shall be small in scale. Structures determined to be of historic value may remain. The district shall have circulation in the form of internal streets and sidewalks, and pedestrian access may be provided to adjacent Great Park uses. A perimeter system of trees, trails and gardens for use and enjoyment by cemetery visitors and the general public shall integrate the district with Great Park and adjacent uses.



The language of the Initiative, which was adopted word-for-word by the Irvine City Council on May 12th, clearly expresses the will of the people to promptly deliver on the promise of a beautiful Veterans Memorial Park & Cemetery at the 125-acre ARDA site.

Unfortunately, the day after the City Council took its historic action, a false political narrative began to emerge, advanced by special interests long opposed to our citizens' Initiative, as well as some elected officials. The narrative can be summed up this way: *With the COVID-19 pandemic, the State is broke, the City is broke. The Veterans Memorial Park & Cemetery can't be funded. It's dead.*

This is absolutely false. Of course, the COVID-19 pandemic, with its horrific loss of life and continuing damage to public health, has also caused a mammoth disruption of fiscal affairs for state and local governments. But make no mistake about it: We can begin construction of the Veterans Memorial Park & Cemetery right now!

Let's Talk Dollars...and Sense

Understanding the current fiscal realities requires that we ignore the nonsense and start talking dollars...and sense. According to the July 2019 official estimate of the State Department of General Services, the cost to prepare the entire ARDA site and build the first phase of the Veterans Memorial Park and Cemetery is \$62.7 million. (For the record, this is about what it costs to build just one railroad undercrossing in Irvine — and we have built three of them!)



So far, the Legislature has appropriated and set aside \$24.5 million in a special CalVet account to build the Veterans Cemetery at the ARDA site in Irvine, in accordance with the detailed 333-page Concept and Design plan previously commissioned by CalVet and approved in 2016.

On July 1st, Governor Newsom signed the 2020/2021 Fiscal Year Budget that included the \$24.5 million previously earmarked for the State-funded Veterans Memorial Park & Cemetery at the Great Park in Irvine.

In addition, this project, once under construction, should be able to secure \$10 million in federal funding as an approved priority project of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. We need to insist that our U.S. Senators and our Orange County congressional delegation start advocating for those federal funds right away.

City/Great Park Resources

Meanwhile, the City of Irvine should not hesitate to rely on our own resources already on hand to begin initial property improvements at the ARDA site immediately. Specifically, I call attention to the \$292 million being paid by the State to the City of Irvine in installments averaging about \$20 million per year through the year 2026. These are the proceeds from the settlement of massive litigation against the State — when the State, in 2011, reneged on more than \$700 million in obligations to the City under Great Park redevelopment agreements.

Using just a small portion of these funds intended for Great Park development, the City — on its own authority — can begin to invest in improvements at our City-owned ARDA site. These improvements would, in fact, add immediate value to our Great Park property and deliver quickly on certain defining elements of what will soon be our magnificent Southern California Veterans Memorial Park & Cemetery.

Let me be specific about what this plan — I call it “Build it NOW!” — entails. The “Build it NOW!” plan has three parts.

Part 1 consists of demolition, removal of debris and hazardous materials (such as asbestos and lead), and clearance of the ARDA site. Consistent with the Initiative’s zoning provisions, the demolition will exclude (for preservation) certain historic structures and features, such as the iconic Aircraft Control Tower and nearby Hangars, for possible restoration and later re-purposing as a new and compelling Great Park feature — an Aviation Museum.

Several years ago, Irvine City planning staff reported that upon submission of the City’s own demolition application, actual on-the-ground demolition can begin in just 60 days. The demolition and related cleanup of the ARDA site would take 8 months and cost an estimated \$8 million. This is according to Patrick Fuscoe, who was the Civil Engineer of Record for the Great Park for 8 years.

Part 2 of the “Build it NOW!” plan is the Perimeter Project — the installation of large berms and a system of Trails, Trees and Memorial Gardens around the entire 2.2-mile perimeter of the ARDA site. As a beautiful passive feature, the Perimeter Project would immediately add value to the Great Park property — especially for nearby residents — by providing access to the emerging 125-acre Veterans Memorial Park and Cemetery and the entire 1,300-acre Great Park. The estimated cost of the Perimeter Project, which can be constructed in one year, is \$5 million.



The combined cost to complete Parts 1 and 2 of the “Build it NOW!” plan is \$16 million.

Once begun, much of the work can be done concurrently, and all of it can be completed in one year.

Part 3 is optional. At an additional estimated cost of \$12 million, Part 3 would involve the restoration and re-purposing of the iconic Aircraft Control Tower and three Hangars on the ARDA site, and retention of the tarmac and most or all of the 2,000-foot runway. All of these features would become integrated elements of the Great Park Aviation Museum. The Museum would feature aircraft, military vehicles, and an array of artifacts from World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War and the Gulf War — helping tell the remarkable story of military service, in wartime and in times of peace, that spanned the 57-year history (1942-1999) of the former El Toro Marine Corps Air Station.



The Great Park Aviation Museum can be constructed concurrently or sequentially, in either case requiring an estimated 18 months to complete.

Completion of Parts 1, 2 and 3 would leave the interior of the ARDA site — nearly 100 acres — for phased construction of the Veterans Cemetery, once the site has been transferred to the State. State construction of the first phase of the Veterans Cemetery will include an Assembly Area and Administrative Building, interment areas and burial grounds, all necessary infrastructure and support facilities, and complementary landscaping. According to the 2016 CalVet-approved Concept and Design plan, the estimated time required for construction is just 30 months.

With the Veterans Cemetery site issue now resolved, it is time to move forward without delay. And as the “Build it NOW!” plan is being implemented, the City should initiate discussions with CalVet regarding formal negotiations and a schedule for concluding Acquisition and Transfer Agreements. The Agreements should include a requirement that when the ARDA site is transferred to the State, it will be with the understanding that the first phase of the Veterans Cemetery will be constructed and completed in a timely manner, becoming operational within the 30 months projected by CalVet. Furthermore, the Agreements should include provisions for the City and Great Park to be reimbursed by the State for funds expended to implement Parts 1, 2, and 3 of the “Build it NOW!” plan.

Conclusion

I think most Irvine citizens would agree that the Veterans Memorial Park & Cemetery is the most beautiful, most compelling and most important project currently awaiting City Council action at the Great Park. To repeat: **We can start building the Southern California Veterans Memorial Park & Cemetery on the ARDA site at our Great Park right now. But the key question remains: Do our Mayor and City Councilmembers really want to see it built?**



For almost three decades, **Larry Agran**, a public interest attorney, served on the Irvine City Council — including 10 years as Mayor. He led the fight to preserve Irvine Open Space, and defeat an international airport at the former El Toro Marine Corps Air Station, creating the opportunity to build the Orange County Great Park, including the Southern California Veterans Memorial Park and Cemetery.