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# Irvine breaks ground on future Great Park projects, estimated cost now at \$1 billion

Priority projects include the Veteran's Memorial Park, live music venue and food establishments



A demolition crew takes down a building, circa early 1970s, that stored air compressors at the former El Toro Marine base in Irvine on Tuesday, May 23, 2023. The city celebrated the next phase of the Great Park development with a groundbreaking. The \$1 billion project will develop 1,300 acres and have a park twice as big as Central Park in New York. City Councilman and Chairman of the Great Park Board, Mike Carroll, said. (Photo by Mindy Schauer, Orange County Register/SCNG)

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Gray, overcast skies on a cold Tuesday morning could not dampen the excitement of the sizable crowd gathered at [Great Park's](#) ARDA site, the former El Toro Marine Base, for the groundbreaking on over 300 acres of amenities.

As Irvine Councilmember Mike Carroll, who chairs the Great Park Board, tooted a horn, an excavator's blade careened into an old, blue-walled building that was once part of the base.

"After many years of community input and after the last year of intensive planning and design," Carroll said, "we are excited to be launching what is a \$1 billion investment to establish the world's next great metropolitan park."



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A demolition crew takes the first chunk out of an early 1970s-era building that stored air compressors at the former El Toro Marine base in Irvine on Tuesday, May 23, 2023. The city celebrated the next phase of the Great Park development with a groundbreaking. The \$1 billion project will develop 1,300 acres and have a park twice as big as Central Park in New York. City Councilman and Chairman of the Great Park Board, Mike Carroll, said. (Photo by Mindy Schauer, Orange County Register/SCNG)

The amenities set to be developed include the Veteran's Memorial Park and Gardens, botanical gardens and a 14,000-seat amphitheater in partnership with Live Nation.

Great Park is already home to a [194-acre sports complex](#) that is twice the size of Disneyland with ball fields, a soccer stadium and sand volleyball courts; trails; an arts pavilion; and, most recently, [Wild Rivers](#).

Demolition of the ARDA site is set to go on until 2025 with construction starting for the Heart of the Park amenities, including the amphitheater, in December 2024.

"Through 2024, the city is going to tear down buildings, remove infrastructure and prepare the site for this big transformation," Carroll said. "We have 77 structures spanning 180,000 square feet of total building area that will be removed from the northern sector where we intend to develop a Veteran's Memorial Park and Gardens and our botanical gardens."

An existing tarmac will be preserved as part of the Veteran's Memorial Park as a "Walk of Honor" with educational displays giving visitors an opportunity to learn about the El Toro Marine Base. The park will also feature quiet areas for reflection.

Efforts will be made to preserve the former air traffic control tower, too, Carroll said.

Gene Kaplan, an Air Force veteran and long-time Irvine resident, said he was "absolutely ecstatic that this is coming to fruition."

"To take a word from Abraham Lincoln, this is hallowed ground. This is the place where recognition should be given to veterans who served here, who left from here, some of whom didn't come back," Kaplan said. "A lot of commercial interests wanted this piece of land, it's worth half a billion dollars, and we said no, the veterans deserve some representation in Orange County."



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A rendering of the proposed botanical gardens in Irvine's Great Park. (Courtesy of City of Irvine)

Adjacent to the Veteran's Memorial Park will be a municipal library that will lend materials and serve as a flexible space for meetings and community gatherings, Carroll said. The botanical gardens will also be in that area.

On the south side of the ARDA site, three vertical buildings — a large machine shop, an old water pump and a storage building — are set to be demolished to make way for the "Cultural Terrace West," where potential partners like a dance studio and children's museum will open facilities, Carroll said.

The amphitheater site does not have any buildings that would require demolition, Carroll said, and construction is expected to begin in that area late next year.

The amphitheater, intended to replace Irvine Meadows, a live music venue that shuttered in 2016 after running for 36 years, was the [subject of complaints by residents who worry about the noise and traffic it will bring](#). Some residents favored a smaller 8,000-seat amphitheater, but Irvine leaders opted to move forward with a 14,000-seat venue, and there are no plans to change that, Carroll said.

In April, [Irvine said the budget for this phase of development had increased to \\$800 million](#) to accommodate an aquatics facility with USA Water Polo. However, at Tuesday's groundbreaking, Carroll said it is now at \$1 billion.

Funding, he said, was coming from Department of Finance redevelopment settlement funds plus the [special Mello-Roos tax that Great Park residents pay](#) — which goes toward local improvement or facility projects meant to benefit them.

Irvine filed several lawsuits with the state following former Gov. Jerry Brown's decision to end redevelopment agencies in 2011. California settled, and [Irvine banked \\$292 million for Great Park's development](#).

The Mello-Roos tax money expected to fund part of the development will not just come from current residents, said Mayor Farrah Khan. Great Park's developer, FivePoint, plans to build houses along the rim of the ARDA site, she said, which will bring additional tax dollars.

Alongside the demolition of the master ARDA site, the city is also actively recruiting for a parkwide architect who can be "the master architect that will oversee all of the differing for a make sure they are cohesive and seamless, really have that same look and feel," said Kristina Perrigoue, Irvine's publication information officer.

Irvine has already hired a landscape architect, said Perrigoue, and partners like Live Nation will hire their own architects for their projects.

Some homes along Cadence overlook the site of the new Great Park developments with Cadence Park School located about half a mile from the demolition and construction area. Portola High School and Beacon Park K-8 School are also a short distance, about one mile, away.

Given the noise and dust potentially arising from the construction site, Irvine Unified School District is in touch with staffers, said Khan, and the district will inform Irvine when it has events or testing going on. Irvine will make arrangements to be as "accommodating as possible for our students," she said.

Given the potential disturbances to residents and students, Irvine will set up a dedicated phone line for anyone to report concerns or pose questions about the projects. Residents can also use the Access Irvine app, Carroll said, to share noise complaints and file reports. Through the app — available for iPhone and Android users — Irvine will provide updates on new developments.

Duc Nguyen, a parent of a Cadence Park School student, said city staffers have already been in touch to reassure him that the dust emanating from the construction site will be contained. He plans to reach out to learn more about the containment process.

Nguyen is excited about the food prospects at the park as he now drives about seven minutes to the nearby Woodbury Town Center for dining options.

Hangar 244 is set to be refurbished into a food hall concept in this phase of development and will be a space that will serve the residents and visitors "a broad array of food experiences," said Councilmember Tammy Kim.

"I am excited that after over two decades of being stalled, being in gridlock, being mired in controversy, being over budgeted, we finally are moving forward with the realization of what our residents expect the Great Park to be," Kim said.

Construction will take place between 7 a.m. and 3:30 p.m. on weekdays, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Saturdays and will pause on Sundays and holidays. Residents can learn more about projects through [a website launched Tuesday](#).

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