



## News from Friends of Harbors, Beaches and Parks

Release date: September 13, 2007

Contact: Theresa Sears  
714-288-0520  
[theresasears@hotmail.com](mailto:theresasears@hotmail.com)

### Park Proponents Say County's Park Plan Lacks Strategic Vision

The chasm between Orange County government and citizen advocates over the future of regional parks and open space is clear cut within the pages of the county's inconclusive park strategic plan, rejected by the Harbors, Beaches and Parks Commission, August 28.

The commission's four to three oppositional vote came just five days after the document was released to the public and two weeks before its scheduled approval by the Board of Supervisors. Local park users, conservationists, equestrians and outdoor recreation enthusiasts who had been invited to participate in the early stages of the planning process were stunned to learn that the final document did not include many of the issues they had discussed. They were also surprised by the last-minute rush to judgment.

Friends of Harbors Beaches and Parks, a volunteer organization focused on the preservation and expansion of the county's parks and open spaces, asked the Board for more time to review the plan. "We needed more than a single weekend to survey the opinions of the groups we represent and gain an understanding of the policies that are driving county staff recommendations," noted FHBP President Jean Watt.

The Board remained silent on the issue until a week following the HBP commission ruling. Plan participants received notice that the item, slated for September 11 Board consideration, was postponed until October 2.

The issue, say park supporters, is whether Orange County's regional park system is going to be managed by the Harbors, Beaches and Parks Department, or by county supervisors. The original plan was developed by a county appointed Stakeholders Advisory Committee, HBP staffers and public input. Just after that draft was submitted last November, the HBP director was fired and two supervisors, Bill Campbell and Chris Norby, set up an ad hoc committee to revise it.

The final plan defers decisions on the countywide trail system and the main funding stream for the Upper Newport Bay Nature Preserve (Newport Bay tidelands) pending “further study.” It does not clearly define the role or authority of Harbors, Beaches and Parks, and recommends 11 park properties for divestiture, but says little about them other than they do not align with the county’s general plan. Two listed parcels are sensitive habitat areas; several others are scenic beaches. The fate of these taxpayer-held lands will be decided with minimal public comment in a future vote by the Board of Supervisors.

The plan praises HBP for its stewardship and park management skills, but alludes to partnerships with private land managers that would allow an understaffed HBP to “have a regional focus.” Just who those private land managers are and what exactly they would be managing is left to a future Board decision. A proposal written last year by the Irvine Ranch Conservancy’s Mike O’Connell, indicates that the Irvine Company subsidiary is interested.

“The plan is not complete,” notes FHBP’s Theresa Sears, “and it’s certainly not strategic. There is no action or financial plan in this version, save for maintenance and operations. This draft is a maintenance manual and lacks vital vision. The ‘opportunities’ section of the plan states that ‘future need will be unmet if current opportunities to acquire additional public lands are missed,’ but there is no strategy for HBP to follow up on this need.”

Friends of Harbors, Beaches and Parks will be asking the Board not to approve the plan until it is complete, until it specifically addresses the roles, activities and policies that will define the county’s regional park system into the future.

“The HBP Commission got it right,” Sears says. “Approving a plan before it is finished is bad policy. It’s bad governance.”

###