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Supporters of Great Park audit hypocritically ignore transparency

Sept. 19, 2015 | Updated 12:00 a.m.

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Was it an audit or a partisan political campaign paid for with our tax dollars? That is the question. Over the objection of Orange County's Republican-dominated state Senate and state Assembly delegation, the California's Joint Legislative Audit Committee voted to direct the state auditor to audit the city of Irvine's audit of the Great Park. Confused? You should be.

When the vote for the forensic audit of the Great Park was taken in 2013, the entire Irvine City Council – including Democrats Larry Agran and Beth Krom – voted for it. The stated goal of the forensic audit of the Great Park was fiscal transparency. A subcommittee of two council members – Christina Shea and Jeffrey Lalloway – was appointed and given unchecked authority. As the cost of the audit grew from \$240,000 to more than \$1.5 million, it was clear they believed they were accountable to no one.

When the proposal to review the work of the two-member subcommittee was brought before the Joint Legislative Audit Committee in Sacramento, Anthony Taylor of the law firm of Aleshire & Wynder joined Mayor Steven Choi in arguing against a state audit of the Great Park audit. They claimed that the city's "audit" of the Great Park was never intended to be a legitimate forensic audit and, citing "local control," that the state had no right to review the "Great Park Audit."

Watching the Irvine City Council majority hide behind high-priced lobbyists and Republican heavy hitters in an effort to derail a transparent review by the state auditor makes one wonder what these Republicans are so afraid of. They seem to believe that there should be no checks and balances on their actions. If so, what's to stop any renegade council majority with an ax to grind from using public funds to advance a political agenda? The audit subcommittee and their hand-picked team of lawyers, accountants and consultants have insisted that the focus of this investigation has legitimately been on what was spent, whether work contracted for was within budget and completed on time and whether any funds were unaccounted for. If that's the case, the Irvine City Council should welcome an independent review.

The allegiance of Irvine's City Council majority and Orange County legislative delegation seems to be with their party – not the public. Having withdrawn their now discredited "preliminary report," Hagen, Streiff, Newton & Oshiro – the audit firm hired to conduct the audit – should refund the money they were paid by the city. The firm has acknowledged that it failed to conduct a forensic audit according to standards of the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants. The HSNO preliminary report released in January 2014 contained so many factual errors and false allegations that it was completely withdrawn by the firm 13 months later, but not before causing significant damage to the reputations of a great many consultants, businesses, political rivals and city administrators. For example, allegations of \$38 million in "missing" funds were claimed by HSNO. Upon closer review, city staff revealed that state law mandated these funds to be transferred from the books of the Great Park to the city of Irvine and held in a special housing set-aside fund. But not before news of the missing money made headlines.

Other claims that contractors lacked the expertise to build the park were refuted upon a closer examination of contractor experience and customer references. Charges that invoices from one contractor were changed after work was performed was fact-checked to a directive by the city to those contractors to comply with a fixed fee contract. Cost estimates to build the park described as wildly inflated lacked context that these estimates included buildings and other park features that were intended to be built with private funds, not taxpayer dollars.

As for the law firm of Aleshire & Wynder, they asked for, and got, an increase of more than \$100,000 in their audit budget to hire experts who were engineers, architects and other contractors to evaluate their findings to make sure the results were accurate and correct. There's no evidence any of these experts were ever hired. And now, there's talk of them asking for even more money. While a vision for a great metropolitan park has been extinguished and private developers have been given control over 688 acres of public land to build a downsized, commercialized "pay-to-play" park, those whose campaigns have been underwritten by those same developers are fighting an objective review of their work.

From the moment the Irvine City Council majority shifted into Republican hands, there has been nothing but Orwellian doublespeak. Transparency is a concept that applies to anyone *but* the City Council majority. Those who spent \$1.5 million in public funds on a so-called "audit" don't want their work reviewed. As an Irvine taxpayer, I'm glad the office of the state auditor has been enlisted. Those who oppose the review must have something to hide.

An investigation about alleged corruption can in itself be corrupted by partisan politics.

Irvine resident Dan Chmielewski runs an Orange County-based PR firm and is the editor of the LiberalOC, the county's leading progressive political blog.



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