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OPINION

The Great Park audit that wasn't

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Some would like to claim that the recently released report from the office of the California State Auditor "found no violation of the law" in their audit of the Great Park review. What the auditors make abundantly clear is that what dragged out over a period of almost two years was not an "audit" at all. The use of the term was a deliberate misrepresentation used to confer credibility on something that many believe was nothing more than a politically motivated witch hunt.

The title of the report, "Poor Governance of the \$1.7 Million Review of the Orange County Great Park Needlessly Compromised the Review's Credibility" says it all. This was not an audit, and met the lowest possible standard for public accountability. As the "audit" budget grew from \$240,000 to \$1.7 million, the council went well beyond any reasonable expenditure of public funds for such a review. If tarnishing the city's reputation at taxpayer expense with unfounded allegations and gratuitous comparisons to "the city of Bell" was their intent, then the subcommittee got what they paid for.

As noted in the State Auditor's report, the two-member Audit Subcommittee operated outside public view and failed to properly update or seek authority from the City Council. They unilaterally hired, fired and extended contracts, many of which were sole source with no transparency or staff oversight.

The City Council gave the subcommittee subpoena power without any indication that people were unwilling to be deposed. The subcommittee and those they hired also failed to adhere to a state law that allows parties who have been deposed 30 days to review and sign their deposition transcript. Deposing staff and assailing the integrity of people they have worked with has a chilling effect, particularly with a subcommittee seemingly accountable to no one.

After launching the review with allegations of sole-source contracts, work done without prior authorization and high cost contract extensions related to planning, design and construction of the Great Park, the subcommittee proceeded to employ those very practices. The State Auditor's report revealed that, for reasons that could not be explained, the city altered its procurement process by awarding 12 bonus points to HSNO, the winning audit firm. That moved HSNO from third place to first place. HSNO's initial \$240,000 contract ballooned to \$778,000 despite producing false facts in their preliminary report to suggest improprieties where none existed. The law firm of Aleshire & Wynder were then brought in by the subcommittee to "manage" HSNO's review. They banked over \$670,000.

So what did Irvine taxpayers get for \$1.7 million? As my grandmother would say, they got "bupkis." The review showed no funds misspent or unaccounted for. The review appears to have been designed to delegitimize the years of work done to build the initial park features and advance a "public park" vision. It also provided a smokescreen to allow the council to shift control of Great Park planning and development to private developers. Now, instead of a park rivaling Central Park or Balboa Park, we can look forward to a downsized, commercialized and corporatized "retail serving park" with "pay to play" sports fields, and none of the beauty and charm of other great metropolitan parks.

I urge people to read the State Auditor's report online. \$1.7 million directed by a subcommittee of two for a review that was not transparent, failed to meet auditing standards and was poorly executed. If the goal was to undermine the city's credibility, damage the reputations of political foes and give developers control of the park and the right to build 9,500 homes at the former marine base, I'd say they were successful on all counts.

So much for fiscal accountability.

Beth Krom is an Irvine city councilwoman.