

Local news

Politics, Wilder decision linked

Wilder Ranch
By ROBIN MUSITELLI
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — A deal to develop an RV campground at Wilder Ranch has been dumped, but political campfires are burning hot in the state Senate race.

Democrats charge that the deal was doused as opposition picked up so it wouldn't singe Assemblyman Bruce McPherson, the Republican candidate for the 15th District state Senate seat who they claim flipped sides after being a closet supporter of the Wilder proposal.

McPherson, in response, accuses Democrats of deliberately misstating his position and says his Democratic opponent Rusty Areias opposed the Wilder proposal only to pander to progressives and pick up green credentials.

"I think it's pretty evident that's the case," said McPherson. "But if Rusty Areias is going to try to paint himself green, he's going to have to bring some different brushes to the table," said McPherson.

McPherson and Areias, a former Assemblyman and a California Coastal Commissioner, are vying for the state Senate seat, now held by Sen. Henry Mello, D-Watsonville.

The finger-pointing started after a deal to convert a 300-acre sand quarry into a recreational vehicle campground at Wilder Ranch was taken off the table Wednesday by Graniterock Co., which proposed the development in conjunction with the state Department of Parks and Recreation.

Opposition to the project in Santa Cruz County was widespread and growing when Graniterock pulled the plug. Graniterock co-president Steve Woolpert said the company was unhappy with how the state park's process excluded local opinion and decision making.

California Democratic Party regional director John Crosson accused Republicans of killing the Wilder plan to quell opposition that could hurt McPherson's campaign.

Areias said he didn't know if that was the motivation. But if McPherson is elected, there is a "high likelihood" the project will come back to life, Areias maintained.

Areias also charged that McPherson wrote legislation, approved last year, to allow an extension on contracts that concessions have to operate in state parks.

The law would benefit Graniterock by allowing them a long-term lease,



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Former site manager Mannie Shaffer and Graniterock president Steve Woolpert. 1-20-90

said Areias.

McPherson said the legislation was sought by the state parks department so it would not have to renegotiate each of the approximate 200 concessionaires contracts statewide every few years.

"It was costly to the department operations and they felt long-term leases would result in better concessions," said McPherson.

McPherson said he generally favors public-private partnerships. But he always thought the Wilder project should be subject to local approvals and planning, he said.

As more specifics of the plan became known, McPherson said he became increasingly disillusioned with it.

McPherson said he lobbied against it with Donald Murphy, state parks director, and with Steve Woolpert, Bruce Woolpert's brother and co-president of Graniterock.

In killing the deal, Steve Woolpert credited McPherson, who he said "heightened my awareness of the importance of local review and public participation."

Steve Woolpert also denied pulling the project to keep it from hurting McPherson's campaign. He said earlier this week, "I don't know anything about Republican or Democrat politics on this issue."

"That's disingenuous at best and it's an outright lie at worst," Areias said of that statement.

Areias said partisan politics became evident after he issued a fund-raising letter that called the Wilder proposal a "scheme that would alter the character of our area permanently."

The Woolperts previously were large contributors to Areias's past six Assembly campaigns and contributed about

\$9,000 to his bid to become state controller.

Bruce Woolpert wrote that Areias took "an unjustified position with regard to this project simply to earn the help and support of Santa Cruz' progressive group."

"You have either changed or I never really knew the real Rusty Areias," wrote Bruce Woolpert.

"I am very disappointed in you. It should not come as a surprise to you that I will not be supporting you in your race for the California Senate."

Areias denies he took the anti-Wilder position just to gain support of a Santa Cruz progressives and environmentalists. "My record is very clear as it relates to quality of life issues along the coast," he said.

Bruce and Steve Woolpert did not return Sentinel phone calls.