

SANTA CRUZ

Longtime City Manager Dick Wilson will retire

Leader oversaw earthquake recovery, economic crisis in career spanning three decades

City manager
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SANTA CRUZ — Dick Wilson, who as city manager for 28 years has seen Santa Cruz through a devastating earthquake, steep budget cuts, an ever-changing political landscape and worries over water and university growth, announced Wednesday he will retire at the end of July.

"If I waited until I was tired of that work to retire, it would never happen," Wilson said, repeating a line from the statement he released Wednesday morning. "I really want to have a different work life. I have a lot of books to write."

The first book will be about public management, and no, he said, it won't be a tell-all about his life as the city's top non-elected official over the span of three decades. Years ago, the International City/County Management Association published Wilson's first book about the 1989 Loma Prieta quake, which many see as his greatest accomplishment in governance.

Wilson, 63, notified City Council members Tuesday night about his retirement.

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DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Dick Wilson, Santa Cruz's city manager since 1981, will retire in July.

WILSON

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Councilman Ryan Coonerty said the council is working on a process to replace Wilson, whose retirement had been somewhat anticipated.

"It wasn't a surprise, but it still doesn't take away the shock of trying to imagine the city of Santa Cruz without Dick Wilson running it every day," said Coonerty, who was 7 when Wilson became city manager in 1981. "He is very steady. Santa Cruz has benefited from his calm and focus."

After a brief stint in El Cerrito, Wilson came to Surf City in 1979 as an assistant manager and was quickly promoted.

"I never in a million years thought I'd last that long," Wilson said, adding that he thought he'd become an assistant manager in a big city like San Diego.

As city managers go, "Longevity is not something people do," he said. Indeed, the International City/County Management Association reports that the average term of service for city managers in the same job is seven years.

"Even though I've been in the same position a long time, my work has changed continuously," he said. "I never had a year like the year before."

Born in Lawrence, Kan., Wilson attended high school in Los Angeles after his father, who worked for Alcoa Aluminum, moved the family west. He attended UC Santa Barbara for his

undergraduate degree and the University of Kansas for a master's degree in public administration.

He and his wife of 41 years, Jill Wilson, a Santa Cruz attorney specializing in estate planning, plan to stay in town. She is not retiring, he said.

The couple has two children: Brian Wilson, who works for the United Nations in New York, and daughter Erin Joshi, an attorney for the federal government in Washington, where Wilson and his wife often visit their two grandchildren, 2½-year-old Shaila and 7-month-old Naveen.

Long heralded for his cool temperament and adroit handling of the chameleon politics of the City Council from year to year, Wilson said, "My job is to honor the choices they make and do the best I can to take those choices and produce the best possible results."

Mayor Mike Rotkin, who helped hire Wilson in 1979, praised the work the city manager has done.

"Although, of course, no one person is indispensable in a city government, Dick Wilson comes close," Rotkin said. "His ability to successfully manage a city government in a community that expects a high level of services while frequently opposing many of the kinds of development projects that are necessary to fund such services is more than impressive — it is magical."

Water Director Bill Kocher, who was hired by Wilson 25 years ago, said the secret to his boss' success is that "he isn't a political animal at all." Rather, Kocher said, Wilson makes decisions based on a broader view.

"Dick's direction is always, do

what you know is right, and whatever comes of it," Kocher said. "As long as you embrace that, you're fine. You know he's covering your back."

Wilson counts the earthquake and subsequent rebuilding downtown as the most difficult challenges of his career, along with managing the current economic struggles.

"In those kinds of circumstances, they bring out the best in people or bring out the worst in people," he said of the 6.9 temblor that devastated downtown. "In Santa Cruz, it brought out the best in people. Overnight we witnessed an incredible display of cooperation and compassion."

He said one of the biggest hurdles facing the new city manager is dwindling tax revenue that has cost 110 city jobs since 2002. The city, now employing 380 people, has a total budget of \$179 million, having once topped \$200 million. In 2008, Wilson earned \$216,000, but took a 10 percent pay cut this year through furloughs, along with many other city employees.

Besides grappling with state funding raids, which have contributed to the city's budget woes, other major concerns for Wilson's replacement will be bolstering the water supply and maintaining affordable housing.

Architect Mark Primack, who served on the council from 2000-2004 and chairs the Homeless Garden Project, said, "I think this town is lucky to have had Dick Wilson and his commitment over the years. He has been a perfect complement and balance to the city councils."