

On last day, Wilson still the definition of humility

After 29 years, Santa Cruz's steady hand ends career as city manager

By J.M. BROWN

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SANTA CRUZ — Dick Wilson, Santa Cruz city manager for 29 years, says he put off retirement to see the city through the major cost-cutting measures that have defined the past two years.

But one wonders if the real motivation was to dodge, for as long as possible, the endless parade of plaudits certain to accompany his departure.

Even on his last working day at City Hall on Wednesday, when tooting his own horn a bit would be entirely appropriate, the ever-demure 64-year-old grand-



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

Dick Wilson ended his 29-year tenure as Santa Cruz city manager on Wednesday.

father of two was busy praising others and looking forward to his next career. Wilson wants to take all the wisdom he's gained managing the city — the greatest achievement of which was managing to

avoid politics — and pour it into writing instructional books for other public service leaders.

"I've always loved coming to work," Wilson said. "I don't feel like I'm escaping or that I have some huge sense of relief."

His three decades at the top are more than four times longer than the average city manager's tenure in a single location, according to the International City/County Management Association. Employees and council members alike cite Wilson's kind, self-assured demeanor as the key to his longevity.

"I really feel that he provides a calming element," said 30-year employee Dannette Shoemaker, director of the Parks and Recreation Department. "He's not the

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kind of person who jumps up and down, whether he's happy or mad."

As a tribute to Wilson's enduring magnetism, his secretary of 19 years, Suzanne Haberman, politely declined an interview, saying only, "I can't. I'll cry."

Wilson, who came to Santa Cruz in 1979 as assistant city manager after seven years working in El Cerrito, announced his retirement in January. In May, the council appointed Assistant City Manager Martin Bernal as the successor to take over Monday.

A Kansas native who grew up in the East Bay, Wilson counts the October 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake and downtown rebuilding efforts as the most challenging times of his career. He counted the creation of the redevelopment agency and hiring Ceil Cirillo as its first director as critical decisions.

"He has led from behind, quietly guiding policy through insight and wisdom," said Cirillo, who served in the role for 18 years and now serves on the Sentinel's editorial board. "He has established a tradition of consistency and reliability that can only be apparent if and when it is no longer there."

Wilson said the financial difficulty of the past two years, which required lay-

DICK WILSON

AGE: 64

JOB: Santa Cruz city manager since 1981. Wilson's last day at the office was Wednesday.

RESIDENCE: Santa Cruz

FAMILY: Wife of 41 years, Jill Wilson; children Brian Wilson and Erin Joshi; grandchildren Shaila and Naveen Joshi

offs and furloughs to shave millions from the budget, also has been a trying time.

"A lot of people lost their jobs and their livelihood," he said. "We were not alone in this, but it was still painful."

Wilson, who allowed a modest retirement celebration before his final council meeting Tuesday, often answers questions about his leadership style by citing the achievements of his staff or the burdens of council members. Asking him to wade into the political minutiae that guides the decisions of his seven bosses is a futile exercise, a trap door he has masterfully avoided as council majorities change every few years.

"If we get told to do something, there is no difference between a 4-3 vote and 7-0," he said, adding that other city executives are often urged to be strong partisan voices. "The political arena in Santa Cruz is full."

After all these years, what isn't full,

remarkably, is Wilson's office. It's sparsely decorated with a large earth-tone tapestry on the wall and pictures of his grandchildren, Shaila and Naveen, by his clean and organized desk, which overlooks the library. Aside from a stack of agreements waiting to be signed, his office was virtually free of paper. "I'm a discarder," Wilson said.

A display box containing pliers for pulling teeth and other rudimentary tools — meant to serve as a reminder of last year's agonizing cuts — speaks to Wilson's sense of humor, which would serve him well if he wanted to write a book about the unique experience of leading this famously eccentric city.

"No one would read it," he said with his trademark humility.

Wilson will continue living in the West-side home he and his wife of 41 years, estate planner Jill Wilson, have shared since arriving in Santa Cruz. The couple travels frequently to visit their children: Brian Wilson, who works for the United Nations in New York, and daughter Erin Joshi, an attorney for the Director of National Intelligence in Washington.

While Wilson's open door will be missed at City Hall, it's comforting to know he'll still be around town, Shoemaker said.

"He knows the community so well and he cares about the community," she said. "I've always valued my relationship with him because I could go to him morning, noon and night."