

Our transcription of Roz Rogoff's interview of Abram Wilson, former mayor of San Ramon, on April 18, 2012, on San Ramon Observer blogcast radio:

Link to the blogcast interview: <http://www.blogtalkradio.com/san-ramon-observer/2012/04/18/abram-wilson-answers-questions-on-tassajara-valley>

Roz Rogoff: Hello, and welcome to my first blogcast of the San Ramon Observer on blogcast radio. I'm Roz Rogoff, and I've been blogging on the internet, as the San Ramon Observer, for almost ten years. For the last three years, I've been writing the San Ramon Observer blog for the San Ramon Express. You can read my blogs twice a week at the San Ramon Express, on sanramonexpress.com. And sign up to receive email notifications of what's happening in San Ramon and the Tri-Valley. The San Ramon Express, the Danville Express, the Pleasanton Weekly, are your local news for the Tri-Valley.

For my first show, my first guest is the first mayor of San Ramon, Abram Wilson. I'm sure everyone in San Ramon knows who Mayor Wilson is. He was the last appointed mayor in 2003, and the first elected mayor later that year. Since the initiative to have an elected mayor set term limits of four two-year terms, Mayor Wilson termed out last year. He ran again for City Council, but many voters thought that would be a step down, or maybe trying to hold on too long. Even though Mayor Wilson isn't on the City Council now, he's still finding ways to support the city and the Tri-Valley region. So I shall welcome Mayor Wilson to the show to tell us what he's doing now, and what his plans are for the future of the Tri-Valley. Welcome, Abram, you're on the air.

Abram Wilson: Thank you, Roz. Good morning. How are you?

Rogoff: Good morning. I'm nervous, trying to get myself used to the switchboard here and all the controls.

Wilson: Well, you'll do an excellent job as you normally do.

Rogoff: Thank you. (laughter, both try to speak) Go ahead.

Wilson: I have been, I wanted to thank, to begin with, the residents of San Ramon and the whole Tri-Valley. And the county, everyone in the county, and everyone supported me, and my endeavors to make San Ramon and the valley and the state a better place to live and work. I really appreciate. As I run into people, on a daily basis, they're coming up to me and saying thank you, and I appreciate that immensely.

Rogoff: Well, you contributed so much to San Ramon, not just as mayor, but on the City Council for four years, and before that, you served on various committees, and Parks and Recreation Committee. So you just spent your whole, practically half your life, serving the city. I mean, people should appreciate that.

Wilson: Well, it was a labor of love, and it is. You know, when I first, we've lived here for 35 years, and we've seen a lot of good things, and a majority of good things. A couple of things that we would have changed, but I still believe, as I look around, that this is one of the best cities in the United States. When I had a chance to compare San Ramon to the rest of the cities around the United States, I'm very very proud and honored to represent San Ramon.

Rogoff: I agree completely, and you know, we know that the complaints we hear occasionally are relatively minor compared to other problems in other places. We're just so lucky to be here.

Wilson: Right. When I go to and talk to other mayors and they're saying here, they're complaining about this, they're complaining about the parks, the grass not being one inch versus two inch, and things like that, and you know, we're just very blessed that we have a city who takes pride.

Rogoff: Well, I wanted to ask you about the proposal you received from Sid Corrie. You called me, I guess it was maybe about a month ago, and you said that he had called you about Tassajara Valley. Could you tell us a little bit more about what this proposal is, and what you're working on now?

Wilson: Yes, about six months ago, right in, of course, between the election, running for the Assembly and dealing with that, Mr. Corrie called and said "you know, I have this cemetery I've been working on for five years. And I'm at the point of my, now that I, want to take some action on this. And I want to make sure the city's a part of this." And he came to me and said, "I'd like the city to consider maybe purchasing the land and running the cemetery." And I said, "Oh, that's interesting." (laughter)

Then I started doing some research, and realized that in Colma, California, they get a lot of revenue from that. And we're always looking for revenue, and it would serve a need. And you know, there is not a major cemetery planned for this area. Livermore has a small one, Dublin has a small one, a couple ones, Pleasanton, but they're all almost to capacity. We don't have one, Danville and this area. The Lamorinda area has one or two, but they're getting filled quite fast.

So I started thinking about this, and I said, "Oh, this makes sense. It serves a need, and it could be a revenue." But again, when you're thinking about this, I had to think about debt service, not going into debt, how do we accomplish this.

And I was thinking that a bond issue. San Ramon is one of the few cities that has a triple-A bond rating, and everyone's looking to this.

Rogoff: Well, I remember interviewing Sid Corrie, must have been about a year, or a year and a half ago. It was during the political campaign about Measure W, because Sid Corrie was being, you know, his original plans for that land was to put something like four thousand homes on it, that number was being thrown around. And I knew that he had changed his plans, and was planning to put a cemetery there. So I knew that there weren't going to be four thousand houses there.

But he was very very proud of the development that he had, and he had quite elaborate plans for a large mortuary, and a two-level cemetery, going up on a ridge. And the neighbors, the Newmans, and I also interviewed them, and I wrote one of my blogs on their perspective, felt that this was just too commercialized, too urbanized, for that open space.

So I'm wondering, would you stick with his original plans, or would you modify them somewhat, would you speak to the Newmans about it?

Wilson: Well, I had plans of speaking to the Newmans. I wanted to see first whether or not it was financially feasible for the cities to get involved, to consider getting involved, that's number one. I think any plan can be modified. But when you look at the area, 70% of this would be open space, and I think that, that's important. When you look at Measure W, and the most important thing, that I think, talking to residents about Measure W, they didn't want homes there. Neither did the City Council. The schools are over-crowded. All these things would say, what do we do with that land that would serve the community, as well as bring revenue in? So I think that, more than anything else, the possibility of putting something like that would benefit this area.

Rogoff: Well, I think it sounds like it is something that is needed, and in fact I remember when Curt Kinney went out there and spoke to Sid Corrie, that was about 2005, and suggested the cemetery. And he also did some research on the profitability of a cemetery, which he told me about. And the only problem with that is that it takes a lot longer to make the money because it's, it's a slow build-up. You don't have a hundred thousand people all keeling over at once and then being buried.

Wilson: Right.

Rogoff: So it is something that grows over a period of time. Is that something the cities can invest in now, you know, long range?

Wilson: Right. I was looking at that factor also, and people are now becoming more pro-active, especially baby boomers, who have, like I have just gone through, the death of both of my parents. And finding a cemetery, that I felt comfortable with, the financial aspects, all of that. And a lot of the baby boomers would like to make sure that their children are not going through that, so they would like to purchase a plot or whatever they feel that they want to be incarcerated in, now, and pre-pay that. So that we're seeing a lot of baby boomers do that.

And if we do a bond initiative, then the debt service would come from that, because we're looking at Colma, and the other cities around here that have small cemeteries and how people are coming in and purchasing that package early, so that they don't have that burden on their children. And that aspect will be taken care of. So there are a lot of things to look at to make sure it's financially sound, and it is not a burden on the community.

Rogoff: I don't know how far Sid Corrie had gotten with the county, because he'd been working on this six or seven years now. And I asked the question at the "Green Debate," or discussion, it wasn't really a debate, it was more like a question and answer session, that was held last week [April 12] with the County Supervisor candidates for the various environmental groups. It was hosted by the Greenbelt Alliance.

Wilson: Right.

Rogoff: And I know you were there, because I saw you come in.

Wilson: Yes.

Rogoff: And I was taking notes for the San Ramon Express, and I was sitting up front, and I asked the question, where their position was on this cemetery, and I thought the answers were really pretty interesting, I was a little surprised.

Tomi Van de Brooke said that she had been up on the hill, she was probably invited up there by the Newmans, and looked down on it, and she wasn't quite sure this was a good place for it.

And Candace Anderson said that she wasn't crazy about it, but it would be better than houses.

But I thought that Sean White's answer was the most interesting. He said something about "green burials," where you don't pollute the ground with the embalming fluid. And I'd never heard of that before, but I would think that would be a popular idea around here, and maybe that's something to consider.

Wilson: Well, it's like anything else. There are so many different religious groups that have different, different ideas of how they would like to bury their loved ones. So that this would be an opportunity. We're seeing, I didn't get to this, seeing a lot of interest from even outside the United States, of people coming in who would like to, because of religious practices, would like to have an area like that to bury their loved ones' remains. So there could be a green section for those who want that there, and the more traditional.

And again, it is 222 acres, and that is enough space for everyone to be welcomed. And to look at this, I think that Ms. Anderson's idea was that she was, I don't think opposed to it, but again, is like you look at things, and because she's been on City Council, would have to look at it and say, is this best for the community. And I feel that after she reviews it, that when you look at the alternative of constantly going through whether there'd be homes there, whether there'd not be homes there, that to put something that would benefit everyone, and you would not have to worry about that. I think Measure W, and again both sides of the City Council, as well as those who were opposed, were in agreement that the last thing that we wanted there were homes.

And the New Farm project would, this would almost end that possibility of that coming here. I would have preferred the city and the residents have control over that, but since we don't, I want to make sure that that area is not developed, because I don't think that we can afford it.

But again, I think all those ideas about the cemetery are so important. And there's adequate room to do that, to -

Rogoff: This would be something that you wouldn't, that San Ramon wouldn't, do on their own, you would do this with the Tri-Valley, with Danville and with Dublin and Pleasanton and Livermore, and make some sort of a j - what do they call it?

Wilson: A "JPA [Joint Powers Authority]," a "JPA," yes, or a private-public-partnership, or something like that. Initially we thought of San Ramon, then, this area, the Tri-Valley, has such a unique partnership, of all the five cities working together.

You know, when you look at the East Bay [Regional] Communications System [Authority], it started with Livermore and Pleasanton and Dublin, and I walked in and said, "Wow, you have a system that you're thinking about, what about San Ramon?" And they looked at me and said "Well, why don't you go and see whether Contra Costa would be interested in it?" And I said, "OK, I'll take that on." And now it's almost 70% complete. And that is, that's the same thing, working together, there's so many things that you can do, when you work together. So that -

Rogoff: Well now, one of the big situations in Tassajara Valley is water. And I know that Tom Koch has said that he's got, arranged some sort of deal, I think with Kern County, or with some -

Wilson: Yes.

Rogoff: place down south to get their water, and he wants, or believes, that DSRSD [Dublin San Ramon Services District] will wheel the water, what that means in water terms, is ship the water up there, using their pipes, that they go through Dougherty Valley with, to Tassajara Valley. And I mentioned that to Bert Michalczyk, I hope I pronounced his name right, and he said he never heard of it, and he's not for it. So, you know, he doesn't care what Tom Koch wants.

So I would say that probably the lack of water is one of the first things that will keep New Farm from being developed. But (confused) cemetery, Sid Corrie told me he found an endless well, but I don't believe there is such a thing. How will the cemetery get water? Or will you do some other kind of ground, you know, development, instead of just grass, use other kinds of water-tolerant plants?

Wilson: Well, I think the combination, but I think that again, recycled water, there are wells out there, but recycled water is a good way to go, more than anything else.

Rogoff: So you'd go with the recycled water program from DSRSD?

Wilson: Yes, there's options of doing that. You're just, you're just basically watering the lawn, what lawn there would be, and things like that, and open space. So it could be very very very natural. But those are the things, one of the things, we could look at.

But I think that there is, that's why I want to sit down with all of the cities, and see whether or not this is feasible or not. And whether or not it just makes sense to consider this.

Rogoff: What kind of timeline are you looking at?

Wilson: I think as soon as possible. I would like to, next month or so, at least, sit down and go, this is reasonable, this is not reasonable, that type of thing. It's because, I know that, after doing a little research, we have people from outside the United States, are coming in, and looking at that area. The only thing that they don't make, you cannot make, more of, is land. And people from outside the United States understand that, and when you look at this valley, and you look at who owns a lot of property here, you realize a lot of the property is owned by non-Americans. But still –

Rogoff: The New Farm property is owned by the Jordanian Mr. Kavar.

Wilson: Yes, I believe so.

Rogoff: Developed by Tom Koch, but he doesn't own it.

Wilson: No, no, no. And the fact that, this is a, the cemetery is a need in this area. So what I think, that these are things that, you know, you sit down with all five cities and everyone can say OK, this makes sense, this does not make sense, this is financially feasible, this is not. And we do a debt service, how much does it cost, if we, you know, when you put out a bond initiative out there, again, we have triple-A bond rating. All the other cities in this area are doing extremely well, this bond would go extremely fast. And I think that people would be, here, I use this, "dying to get in" (laughs). It would have a need, and people would say, "Oh, I want to not put that burden on my children, and buy that area that I want to be planted."

Rogoff: Well, we're getting close to the end of the show. We don't have any other callers, so there's no one here to ask a question. How would you like to just fill in what other things you've been doing in your life, and how things are going. I've seen you actually look better and happier and more relaxed than I've seen you in years.

Wilson: (laughs)

Rogoff: So I think things must be going pretty well.

Wilson: I, fortunately, I have two brand-new grandchildren, so I can get a chance to say hello to my family, and that's just been fantastic. I have a lot of "honey-do's" that I have put on the back burner for 12, 13 years, and I'm catching up on that. And another program that I, in fact I'm going this afternoon, I'm working with seven high-school students. There, we have an organization, a fraternity that's actually looking to give them full scholarships to go to college. So we're starting at

this age, and working with them academically, on social skills, all of those things. So I'm very entrenched in that, in helping children who possibly would not have the funds but have the motivation, to have that life support, and that financial support, to go to college. So I'm really excited about that.

Rogoff: Well, that sounds very exciting. And it sounds like you're really involved in doing a lot of things, and we were so happy to have you in San Ramon, and so committed to helping everybody, and trying new things. So, we still have some time left on the show, I don't know if there's anything else you want to say or add, or we could just cut it short for the first show.

Wilson: You know, it was really interesting. We, something came up the other day, the childcare in the homes in the area. And as residents know, I've always been the opposed to the state mandating and telling local governments what they have to do and not do in their cities. I think local control is the best thing. And as you know, the state can mandate that anyone who wants to open up a childcare or senior care or any other care home, up to eight, is automatic, unless it's safety or other things like that. And I, we've, gotten to the point now that a lot of people are moving into the area, and to subsidize their income, are moving into residential areas, and not only having eight children, but adding up to, I think it's fifteen, or something like that –

Rogoff: No, it's fourteen, the maximum is fourteen.

Wilson: the maximum is fourteen children. So I had a, I've always had, a concern with that, that you move into an area, a residential area, and you bring in a business. And I understand that one, that childcare is so important, quality childcare is so important. But one's quality of life is so important also. And, you know, a lot of people don't want to say that when you move into a home, and you have fourteen, you're taking care of fourteen children. And I just, we're talking about my grandchildren, and how they're the love of my life. But having fourteen children move in next to me, or staying during the day, that would have to affect me, whether or not I would purchase a home, next to that, as much as I love children. And I think that one has to look at that. Just because the state government says it's mandated, you have to do this and have to do that. They're doing such a, quote, great job, up in Sacramento, to come and say that one has to do this, and really really bothers me. I think each case is different and each neighborhood is different. And they should be taken on a case-by-case basis, and not just mandated. I would be – go ahead.

Rogoff: I know the one you're talking about, which is the one that's on Ensenada, that's just been approved, and I wrote my blog on that for this week, it's up on the San Ramon Express.

Wilson: Oh, OK.

Rogoff: Plug my blog! But, yes, I looked at that code. I remember years ago these issues came up, and I wrote a couple of commentaries on them, back in like, oh, San Ramon –

Wilson: Right.

Rogoff: San Ramon Observer website. And it, you're right, it's almost impossible. First place, the state licenses up to eight without any input from the cities, or control from the cities, or even knowledge of the neighborhood. They, nobody's notified. So they move into a house, they can get the license, and I think they can get a temporary license, for about six months or a year, and then it's made a permanent license and that's when they can apply for the expansion to the fourteen. And then -

Wilson: And the horror stories that the neighbors have told me, as mayor, about what goes on -

Rogoff: Well, I put some stories about some of these group homes,

Wilson: Yes.

Rogoff: Not so much about day care.

Wilson: Not day care. Right, it's just the fact that it's the same premise, that you're mandated -

Rogoff: They allow all sorts of things, and I've looked at the code, and I have some comments in my blog. And I had a neighbor, a friend of mine, who lives on Mesa Vista Court, which you may remember. It was one of the few appeals against the permit that was upheld, the appeal was upheld, and the permit for the enlarged daycare was rejected. But it was a very, very specific case that fit the very narrow rules that the state allows a city to deny a permit. Almost no place meets those requirements, except this house, this particular neighborhood, met those requirements for traffic and noise and the closeness of another large daycare and a whole bunch of other things, other situations. So there, again, this is a situation that has to be corrected in Sacramento. You (confused) go up there and champion changing this code to make it -

Wilson: Well, we keep sending the same people up there and we get the same result. But the problem is the group home here. It's in Contra Costa County but Contra Costa will not send children to the group home in San Ramon because they don't feel that that is run adequately. But we get all the children from Alameda coming there. And again, our own county will not send children there, but the city of San Ramon has to take it because the state says that you have to take, and cannot tell them they cannot have a group home. It's things like that, that really concern me, and the quality of life for the residents, and San Ramon.

Rogoff: Well, I hope that you can get, we can get, somebody in Sacramento who will take this issue on, because it's really something important, and I agree with you, those laws need to be tightened up and a little more control given to the cities.

Wilson: And the other thing, I know there's the fact that, San Ramon school district is a low wealth school district. We are, we get less, 25 million a year, because we are a low wealth school district. That is appalling, that we, that there isn't parity between all the school districts. We are constantly requesting more money for our schools. If we were at parity with the other schools, throughout California, that's 25 million that would go to our school system. So there are things like that, that I

want to take a firm hand in, and maybe force the school district to sue the state, so we can just have parity on it. Isn't that ridiculous?

Rogoff: Why don't you run for the school board?

Wilson: (laughs) It's nice talking to you, Roz. I think I can do more by just coming out and just pushing now. You know, as mayor, one has to stay somewhat neutral and do what's best, and you put your own personal feelings aside and you do what's best for the city. As a resident, which I am now, I can be much more candid about things that I would have done differently. You know, I look at my, maybe I'll come in, I'll be invited back and say about what I would have done differently and things like that, so.

Rogoff: Well, we're getting close to the end of the show. So –

Wilson: Time flies when you're having fun!

Rogoff: (laughs) Well, I'm going to wrap it up now, and put on the closing music, which is Tony Furtado's band playing "Gold Image," a beautiful song. And Tony Furtado, I have to pronounce the name right, he's the son of a woman who's very active in our cat rescue group. And I bought his record and it's just wonderful. So I'm going to play his music to end our show. And thank you so much for being our first guest.

Wilson: No, thank you, thank you. Take care.

Rogoff: Thanks.