

# ADMINISTRATOR SENTENCED IN SOUTH BAY

## OFFICIAL TOOK CHARGERS TICKETS, MORE, IN CONTRACTING SCANDAL

By Greg Moran 6:12 p.m. Jan. 7, 2014

WATCHDOG MINUTE: SOUTH BAY SENTENCING

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A former Southwestern College administrator who got meals and gifts from construction contractors angling for work under school bond projects was sentenced to three years' probation on Tuesday after having his charge reduced.

John Wilson, who worked at the Chula Vista college for 30 years and rose to the position of senior director of business operations, pleaded guilty last month to a felony charge of being an accessory to a crime.

He's one of 15 South County education officials and contractors who were indicted a year ago in a wide-ranging probe of gift-giving and possible bribery by construction executives.

He was accused, for instance, of taking tickets to a San Diego Chargers game against the Kansas City Chiefs and a series of meals with tabs as high as \$800 from a contractor whose company he later recommended for a \$2.7 million contract.

Like eight other defendants who have pleaded out their cases, Wilson admitted to no bribery charge and ended up with a lesser misdemeanor conviction instead of a more serious felony on his record.

In his plea agreement, Wilson acknowledged that Henry Amigable, a contracting executive seeking business with the district, gave him gifts in order to influence him, and then Wilson did not report those gifts on public disclosure forms as required by law.

Under state law that charge can be reduced to a misdemeanor. Wilson's lawyer, Kevin McDermott, argued Judge Ana Espana should do just that, citing Wilson's remorse and long years of service to the college working on many projects.

McDermott also noted that the college was giving officials incorrect information on how to fill out the required disclosure forms and didn't realize this until 2009. McDermott also noted in court papers that Amigable — who pleaded guilty and agreed to cooperate with prosecutors — had vouched for Wilson during grand jury testimony.

During a portion of his testimony, Amigable said Wilson “would not do a thing to get himself into any compromised situation” and later said Wilson’s reputation was “impeccable.”

Prosecutors saw Wilson’s role differently. In investigative papers, they noted that participants discussed relocating one meal from the University Club to Morton’s to keep from being seen because Wilson noted that the mingling with was explicitly forbidden by college documents.

In court papers they noted he took gifts for three years. They also noted he retired from the college in December 2009, and by April had been hired as a consultant by a contractor seeking work under a multimillion bond project.

In the end Espana faulted Wilson for the gifts and meals he got, but said Wilson did not set out to damage or undermine the school and pointed to Amigable’s testimony complementing him. She noted his years of managing projects so they were finished on time and under budget and concluded that while he made “a huge error in judgment” she would reduce the charge to a misdemeanor.

She ordered Wilson — who apologized for his conduct in court before he was sentenced — to pay a \$7,994 fine and complete 20 days of public works service cleaning up streets and local parks.

Nicholas Alioto, a former Southwestern administrator who pleaded guilty to the same charge, had his sentencing postponed until Jan. 30. He was in Wisconsin and because of bad weather could not get back to San Diego, his lawyer said.

So far, nine of 15 people indicted in the probe have pleaded guilty. A trial that might take months is set for February.

District Attorney Bonnie Dumanis has called the case the worst instance of public corruption in her tenure. Prosecutors allege the board members and officials accepted meals, trips, campaign contributions and other gifts from construction contractors in exchange for the officials using their influence to steer multimillion-dollar school board construction contracts to the companies.

Some of the defendants have pleaded guilty to misdemeanor charges relating to failure to follow financial disclosure rules required on state economic interest forms. Others have pleaded to perjury charges or being an accessory to a crime.