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Bee Photo by Harlin Smith



Raymond Procnier tends his garden in Davis.

After Resignation

Parole Chief Wants Out

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It's just past noon, and Ray Procnier is washing lettuce at his kitchen sink.

A feisty, carefully trimmed white poodle named Willie is scratching at the kitchen door to be let in, or out. With Willie, one loses track.

Procnier, who has just resigned as chairman of the California Adult Authority, looks tired. He says he is.

After he washes the lettuce, which he grew in his garden, he's going to play tennis.

Maybe he'll work in his shop, where he makes tables and picture frames and bookshelves out of scrap wood and designs metal sculpture to hang on the walls of his house.

Or maybe go fishing, walk the beaches, visit his kids.

Get away from prisons for a while.

By his own account, the administration of the parole board was one of the most trying — and rewarding — jobs of his long prison career. It had been rumored for some time that he might ask Gov. Brown to withdraw his nomination, which was to come before the Senate Rules Committee next week for what was sure to be a heated confirmation battle.

Procnier's was the only Brown nomination to fail Senate Rules confirmation last year — the result of a volatile committee hearing during which the controversial former state prison director was accused by conservatives of being too soft on crime and by liberals as too harsh.

But Brown kept him on as chairman in an interim position, and vowed to fight for him again in the Senate this time around.

But Procnier wants out.

He will return now to the state prison system he headed for eight years, to serve in a special, as yet unspecified, assignment for his successor as director, Jerry Enomoto. He says he may retire soon.

Procnier is 52 and has been in California prison work — first as a guard — for nearly three decades. He was appointed director by then-Gov. Ronald Reagan. He has always been a highly

controversial public figure, and his tenure as parole board chairman was no exception.

He is credited with reforming the indeterminate sentencing system by setting future parole dates for men soon after they entered prison. Critics on the left said the system was illegal and unevenly administered; critics on the right said it gave paroles to men who were not ready. Supporters

contended the system substantially reduced violence in the prisons by giving prisoners something to look forward to.

But that's all behind him, at least for now. This spotless, airy kitchen is a long way from the prison board rooms, where tense men in starched blue shirts are granted freedom or — more often — not.

It's a long way from Soledad and San Quentin and Folsom, from the violence and meanness and tedium that characterize prison life.

But it's hard to imagine this blunt, gregarious prison administrator — who never failed to speak his mind, even when it was a political liability — out of prison work altogether.

"I'm just tired," he says, opening the kitchen door one more time for Willie. "I've been in it too long. I've done what I have to do. I want to do something different now."

What, exactly?

"I don't know. I'm just going to let it evolve. I'm going to go back on some kind of assignment Jerry (Enomoto) wants to put me on. I really want to retire. Things go on. When a guy has been around as long as I have, well, it's time to move on."

"There are a million things to consider at this time in your life. It's time for me to have a hell of a lot more normal life, a hell of a lot quieter life."

The phone rings for the 10th or 12th time — reporters calling, or friends, wondering why he did it and what might make him change his mind.

"No," he tells one, "I don't have any bad feelings about anybody. I really don't. I did the best I know how and I made some mistakes and I did some things right."

"I have another life to live, and things will evolve."

"It's time I leave."