



The Failure of Governance in Bell, California: Big-Time Corruption in a Small Town

Thom Reilly

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“How could this have happened?” The question still lingers among officials and residents of the small southern California town of Bell. Corruption is hardly an isolated challenge to the governance of America’s cities. But following decades of benign obscurity, Bell witnessed the emergence of a truly astonishing level of public wrongdoing—a level succinctly described by Los Angeles District Attorney Steve Cooley as “corruption on steroids.”

Even discounting the enormous sums involved—the top administrator paid himself nearly \$800,000 a year in a town with a \$35,000 average income—this was no ordinary failure of governance. The picture that emerges from years of federal, state, and local investigations, trials, depositions, and media accounts is of an elaborate culture of corruption and deceit created and sustained by top city administrators, councilmembers, police officers, numerous municipal employees, and consultants.

The Failure of Governance in Bell California: Big-Time Corruption in a Small Town details how Bell was rendered vulnerable to such massive malfeasance by a disengaged public, lack of established ethical norms, absence of effective checks and balances, and minimal coverage by an overextended area news media. It is a grim and nearly unbelievable story.

Yet even these factors fail to fully explain how such large-scale corruption could have arisen. More specifically, how did it occur within a structure—the council-manager form of government—that had been deliberately designed to promote good governance? Why were so many officials and employees prepared to participate in or overlook the ongoing corruption? To what degree can theories of governance, such as contagion theory or the “rover bandit” theme, explain the success of such blatant wrongdoing?

The Failure of Governance, by Arizona State University Professor Thom Reilly—himself former county manager of Clark County, Nevada—pursues answers to these and related questions through an analysis of municipal operations that will afford the reader deeper insight into the inner workings of city governments—corrupt and otherwise. By considering factors arising from both theory and practice, Reilly makes clear, in other words, why the sad saga of Bell, California represents both a case study and a warning.

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