The Scandal in the City of Bell:

A Crisis is a Terrible Thing to Waste

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Introduction

Paul Romer, the noted economist, once famously said, “A crisis is a terrible thing to waste.”[[1]](#footnote-1) His quip contains an important insight: Crises can sweep away the old and make way for the new. Crises can provide the opportunity for innovation and reinvention. Crises can push new people and new ideas to the front of the line. Crises can catapult organizations forward by allowing them to make big changes, fast. A crisis can lower “the cost of change while also making clearer the price of not changing. With the right leadership, people are brought together to face an external threat ... and political differences are temporarily set aside. Inertia is lessened when people understand that the status quo will not stand... It would be a pity not to take advantage of it.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

And so it was in Bell, California.

Much of what has been written about the scandal has been negative. In contrast, the argument presented here is that the scandal actually did some good: First, it accelerated the immersion of a new generation of Bell citizens-- all the children of immigrants -- into public life, and, second, it made widespread change possible.

This paper chronicles two sets of leaders: the political activists who overthrew the Rizzo regime and the post-Rizzo city managers who ushered in a series of reforms that remade Bell a model of transparency and ethics best practices. Paradoxically, none of these improvements would have happened had Robert Rizzo never come to town.

What happened?

The public first learned about the scandal on July 15, 2010 when the Los Angeles Times ran a front page story, "Is a city manager worth $800,000?" (Herein referred to as the 800K story). The focal point of the story was city manager Robert Rizzo who conned the city of Bell-- one of the poorest cities in Los Angeles County-- into paying him $1.5 million in salary and benefits, making him the highest compensated city manager in California and probably the United States. As Rizzo's assistant city manager, Angela Spaccia made $376,288 a year in salary and benefits, and Bell's police chief, Randy Adams, who Rizzo recruited and who oversaw only 46 people, was making $457,000, approximately 50% more than the then Los Angeles Police Chief and more than double the compensation of the then New York City's Police Chief. [[3]](#footnote-3) Had he not gotten caught, Rizzo would have retired as the highest paid public servant in the California public employees retirement system (CALPERS), with payments around $650,000 annually. [[4]](#footnote-4)

Soon after the 800K salary story came out, a local neighborhood group, "The Bell Association to Stop the Abuse" (BASTA-- which means "Enough" in Spanish) was formed by future Assemblywoman Cristina Garcia and future Bell Mayor Ali Saleh. BASTA demanded that Rizzo and Spaccia and the entire city council resign. The city council fired Rizzo and Spaccia within a week. On September 21, 2010, Rizzo, Spaccia, Mayor Oscar Hernandez, and council members Luis Artiga, Theresa Jacobo, and George Mirabal were arrested and banned from City Hall. Also arrested were two former councilmen George Cole and Victor Bello.

A special election was held on March 8th of 2011, and the entire city council was replaced. All involved went on trial in 2013, except Mr. Rizzo who accepted a plea deal. Five of the council members and Spaccia were found guilty of multiple felonies. Rizzo and Spaccia were sentenced to more than a decade in state prison and were ordered to pay the city back more than $8 million. Former Councilwoman Jacobo was sentenced to 2 years in state prison and had to pay restitution of $242,000. The remaining five council members received varied amounts of jail time and had to pay the city more than two hundred thousand dollars restitution each. The scandal came to a close with the sentencing of Victor Bello on August 2, 2014.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The Activists

Much of the blame for the Bell scandal has been laid at the feet of its immigrant residents, many of whom are undocumented. The argument goes that Bell was a proud working class community from its inception in 1928 up to the 1970s when globalization swept away major industries and union jobs. Whites fled to Orange County and the Inland Empire, and undocumented immigrants from Mexico and other Latin American countries took their place. Not able to speak English and fearful of being deported, Bell’s Hispanic citizens put up with atrocious abuses by Robert Rizzo, Bell’s city manager. Bell’s civic infrastructure collapsed and voter turnout declined. [[6]](#footnote-6) A Los Angeles Times editorial titled *The lesson of Bell: A watchful citizenry is still crucial,* said “Bell fell prey to these thieves because government stopped answering to the public, and because an apathetic public failed to question the government.” [[7]](#footnote-7)

That all changed when the Los Angeles Times 800K story appeared. Overnight, a formerly disengaged community rose up and overthrew the Rizzo regime which had governed Bell for 17 years.

Classical immigration theory suggests that assimilation takes place over several generations. In the first generation, parents immigrate to the United States and take low paying jobs, often manual labor. Their children go to public schools, where they learn English but continue to speak Spanish to their parents at home. [[8]](#footnote-8)There is no set timetable regarding when children of immigrants become politically active, but the Bell scandal accelerated political activism and engagement by propelling a new generation of leaders--whose parents were all born in a foreign country--into public life.

Below are brief bios of the Bell activists. Cristina Garcia, Ali Saleh, Dale Walker, and Denise Rodarte founded BASTA, the group that launched the recall. Nestor Valencia was not involved BASTA, but he did challenge city hall. [[9]](#footnote-9) Depth interviews with each illustrate how he Bell crises expedited their interest in and ability to navigate local politics.

Each of the activists came from a working class home and grew up in or near Bell, and graduated from public schools. All were bilingual. Their parents were born in Mexico and, in most cases, came across the border as adults in search of a better life. Most of them were undocumented. Ali Saleh’s family, is the exception, coming from Lebanon. [[10]](#footnote-10) One of the most important things that distinguishes the activists from the council members who served under Rizzo was their years of formal education; the activists, as a group, had many more years of schooling. They activists were bright, well-spoken, and self assured, idealistic, and furious about the goings on in City Hall.

Christina Garcia

Cristina Garcia knew instantly that the article-- “Is a City Manager Worth $800,000?”-- was the spark she needed to mobilize the community.

Garcia grew up in Bell Gardens, which borders Bell on its Eastern side. The 710 freeway separates the two cities which are virtually indistinguishable from one another. Her parents had migrated here from Mexico, illegally. After graduating from Bell Gardens High School, she studied math and political science at Pomona College and became a math teacher. She taught math for 13 years in middle, high school, and community colleges in Los Angeles.

Like so many of its young people, including her four siblings, Garcia never expected to return home, but when she was 30 she had to move back to care for her aging parents. Garcia had a political calling from a young age. She followed local politics since she was in her early teens, and organized city council candidate debates and town hall meetings on city issues while in high school.

Back in Bell Gardens, Garcia started attending council meetings and became infuriated by how council members were treating residents: “They were so condescending and rude to anyone that was there with any questions, a challenge, or concern. They’d call community members who spoke during the public comment period ignorant, obstructionist, and would embarrass them by repeating gossip about their personal lives. I kept asking myself, ‘How much are we paying them to belittle us at council meetings?’ Their sense of entitlement was appalling,” she said.

Well educated, self confident and outspoken, Garcia didn’t put up with the belittling. She soon started asking for salaries and budgets and other information, but Bell Gardens’ attorneys refused. She successfully sued under the public records request act to get access to the information. Word got around in the SouthEast that Garcia was the “go to person” if you needed to wrest information from an opaque and uncooperative city council. People in other communities began asking Garcia how to pry loose information from their cities. One of these people was Bell’s Nestor Valencia.

Nestor Valencia

Valencia is a fireplug of a man. Tough and compact, he headed the Bell Residents Club (BRC), a group of civic minded residents he started. The BRC wanted to know why their taxes were so high and how the city was spending their tax dollars. Valencia also grew up in Bell and graduated from Bell High School. Like Garcia, his parents were from Mexico and undocumented. He ran for city council in 2007 and in 2009, losing both times, butting up against George Cole, who had been on the council for more than two decades. Big and burly, Cole was a former steelworker and political shot caller. He was well known throughout the South East. Neither Cole nor Rizzo wanted the very independent and reform minded Valencia on the Council.

Like other residents, Valencia was certain something was wrong in Bell and started asking questions: How does a councilmember from a working class community, where the median income was $30,000 a year, afford to drive around in a $100,000 Mercedes Benz -- when his main source of income was a small corner market? Or, why did property taxes continue to increase, but services continued to decline? And, why did so many Latino teenagers get pulled over and have their cars impounded for the slightest infractions, such as expired tags or a broken tail light, and then had to pay nearly $1,000 in fines and impound fees to get their cars back? Why were the council members so enamored with a part-time job that paid little money? Why were requests for salaries and budget information repeatedly denied by the city’s attorney? And why was it so hard to get a straight answer from Rizzo or council members?

Valencia asked Garcia to speak to the Bell Residents’ Club. Garcia, the bilingual math teacher, had a knack for explaining property tax bills to Spanish speakers, many of whom had little formal education. Residents had concerns about their taxes, how the council was spending money, and the lack of transparency. What could they do, they wanted to know.

This was Garcia’s first introduction to Bell politics. “I was intrigued to find others who were organizing their community around the same issues I was,” she said.

Ali Saleh

In March of 2009, Garcia read a newspaper article about a Lebanese Muslim Bell city council candidate, Ali Saleh, 35, who was being smeared by his opponents who alleged he had terrorist ties. Saleh’s parents had emigrated from Yaroun, a village in Lebanon, on the southern Lebanese border, just North of Israel. They came in the 1970s attracted by the city’s cheap housing prices, good weather, and proximity to downtown Los Angeles. The Lebanese-American community of approximately 2000, which they helped found, kept to themselves and rarely got involved in the civic life or politics.

Saleh grew up in Bell and graduated from Bell High School in 1993. During Saleh’s 2009 run for city council, a flier emerged featuring his head superimposed on a figure holding a sign reading “Islam will dominate the world.” The flier featured photos of people with black hoods standing above a hostage, a radical cleric Mugtada al-Sadr, and the burning World Trade Center towers. The bottom of the flier read, “Vote NO Muslims for the City Bell Council 2009.” [[11]](#footnote-11) Saleh lost the election to the Rizzo backed candidates, incumbent real estate agent Teresa Jacobo and newcomer pastor Luis Artiga.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Denise Rodarte

Rodarte, 30, also grew up in Bell. Her parents were from Mexico and had come into the US illegally in the 1970s. Her mother was a housewife, and her father sold odds and ends he picked up at garage sales and swap meets until he cobbled enough money together to open his own small business.

Rodarte graduated from Bell High and the University of LaVerne, with a degree in broadcast communications. She, her three brothers, and aunts and uncles lived in Bell. Rodarte’s younger brother graduated from Pepperdine and became a police officer in the Bell police department. She heard about the plan to disband Bell’s police department on NPR while driving to the vintage clothing store she owns in Echo Park, a densely populated neighborhood near downtown Los Angeles. She was so shocked by the news that she turned around and drove home. She called her brother and other family members and friends to find out what was going on.

Rodarte had never been to a city council meeting or been involved in politics (other than voting), but she couldn’t wait to go to the next council meeting. “I was appalled at how citizens were being treated. The council was extremely arrogant. They had such a smug look on their faces. They were so cocky and so enthralled in their own power that even if 100 residents showed up to a council meeting, they were just going to do what they wanted to do. Government was supposed to be for the people and by the people. There is something wrong here. I just started to do more digging for myself, and talking to people, and the more I learned, the more I was convinced that we needed to do something.”

Dale Walker

Dale Walker, 28, found out about the city’s plan to disband the police department from a “robo call” put out by the Police Officers’ Association. Up to this time he says he disliked politics. Walker’s parents divorced when he was five years old, and he was raised by his mother who had crossed the border from Mexico illegally. Walker’s mother worked sporadically but was on welfare most of the time he was growing up. He graduated from Bell High and then attended Cerritos community college, where he majored in political science.

Shy by nature, Walker was also enraged by how Bell residents were being treated by the city council when they objected to Rizzo’s plan to disband the police department. “These were simple people and the council was being so disrespectful to them. These were the people who raised me, and I couldn’t believe how the council was acting toward them,” he said. Walker and Rodarte met and exchanged contact information. He said, “I'm very sure I wouldn't have gotten involved in politics had the corruption not been as extensive. The disbelief and anger I encountered with the Bell corruption fueled my involvement.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

BASTA

Within 48 hours after the 800K story broke, BASTA was born, with Garcia, Saleh, Rodarte, and Walker at the helm. Walker and Rodarte were political novices. Saleh had run for office, but was still new to the game. Garcia was the ace. They made several big decisions in their initial meetings. First, they decided to start a new group rather than join Valencia’s group, the Bell Resident’s Club.

Second, the media savvy Garcia wanted the group to have a compelling name. “Right away I decided the name of our group was a big part of convincing people to support us. BASTA means “Enough” in Spanish, but the translation loses the emotion behind the word. BASTA captured how fed up people were. We then created the acronym, ‘Bell Association to Stop the Abuse.’ For its mission, BASTA stated on its website, “We are committed to the empowerment of our residents and stakeholders through honesty, respect, and integrity. We demand good governance through transparency and accountability while respecting the community’s diversity,” [[14]](#footnote-14)Finally, they decided to join forces with the Bell Police Officer Association (POA). The POA gave $10,000 [[15]](#footnote-15) to BASTA to support the recall. BASTA agreed to fight against the disbanding of the police department. [[16]](#footnote-16)

The four discussed *high tech* tools for community organizing (e.g., the need for a website, use of social media, and setting up a database to recruit and organize volunteers.) But they also agreed to use a *low tech* flier to mobilize the community.

The Flier Runs

One of those low tech tools were 8X10 inch black and white fliers which BASTA distributed to the entire city. BASTA members awoke at 3 am and walked Bell’s streets placing a flier on the front porch or front door at every house and apartment in the city. They finished as the sun was coming up. There were more than 20 flier runs. “This was the cheapest, most direct way to reach people. We needed to cover every single household and no one is going to bother you at 3 am. We could move fast because there was no traffic, especially on the side streets where we could easily park and get around fast. Everyone was asleep, so we didn’t have to talk to people, which eats up time,” Rodarte explained.

The first flier was a reprint of the the Los Angeles Times front page $800,000 story. Garcia convinced a friend to open his print shop at night after the first BASTA meeting and print 15,000 black and white copies.

As many as 80 BASTA people would go out in pairs flyering the city. “I would have my alarm set for two or three in the morning and get dressed, and I’d look in the mirror and say to myself I was nuts. My wife and family thought I was crazy, especially that I had promised them no more politics after I’d run for city council and got harassed. I would walk until 6am and then go to work and, man, I was exhausted! We did this at least 20 times, likely more. I just wanted to get these bums out of office,” Saleh said.

BASTA volunteers also communicated with residents by putting up large yard signs announcing BASTA and council meetings and by writing messages on car windows with a soap bar. Volunteer’s cars were parked in high traffic areas, where advertising signs would have been cost prohibitive. The messages were later washed off, and the windows were readied for another missive.

The First City Hall Rally

The first flier was circulated Sunday night, the day after the first BASTA’s leadership meeting. The council met Monday, five days after the $800,000 story broke and two days after BASTA was born. The council chambers, which seat about 100, were filled to the brim. Hundreds more surrounded the one-story modest brick building. BASTA collected everybody’s contact information.

They quickly had to find a space for several hundred people to meet. They had no money, and Bell didn't have many large meeting rooms. Also, no one wanted to be associated with a controversial group that was trying to bring down the entire city government that was such an intimidating presence in the community.

The El-Hussein Community Center

The only place big enough in Bell was the Islamic Community Center, which she hoped they could get for free and use whenever they wanted. Garcia wanted Saleh to ask the Lebanese elders if they could use it. It was a bold, but necessary move.

In the aftermath of 9/11, Muslims in Southern California have at times been victims of bigotry, discrimination, and xenophobia. Often times people in the communities in which they settled, didn’t want them to build mosques, were afraid of them as possible sleeper cells of terrorism, and often protested at events they attended. “So it is no surprise,” writes Mike Moodian, “that Bell’s Lebanese Muslim community didn’t want to call attention to themselves by providing a gathering place for a great American activist movement that was receiving world-wide media attention. However, community elders were won over by Saleh who stressed how important it was for the Lebanese community not to be passive bystanders to corruption.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

The Latino community--which held many of the same prejudices regarding Islam as the larger community-- was also giving Garcia a hard time about meeting in the Islamic Center. “The Latinos said to me that they didn’t want to meet there. I said, ‘If you can find me a place that is just as big, has all these chairs, that has a pa [public address] system, and will open up whenever we want, I will move the community meetings, but in the meantime, this is all I have,” Garcia said.

The El Hussein Meetings

Saleh explained, “We didn’t know how people would take to meeting in the Islamic Center. To my surprise, they were very receptive. I remember that at our first meeting, people came in kind of wondering what to expect, but all they saw were some empty walls, photos, and a little library of religious books along one wall. We had all these stackable chairs. At first, the people would look to me to put the chairs out, one by one, perhaps because they were a little uncomfortable touching something that didn’t belong to them. After a while, I (or someone else) would open the door to the El Hussein Center, and they would walk in by themselves and start organizing the chairs like it was their own house, which was neat because you could see that they felt comfortable being there, and we were all working together. We had at one point 600 to 700 people at the El Hussein Center, and it was packed to the last chair. This is where BASTA came together.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

Over the next nine months, up to the recall election in March of 2011, BASTA met about twice a week at the Center. Usually 300-400 attended the meetings which started at six and often went past nine. Garcia ran the initial meetings, and then Saleh, Rodarte, and Walker took over. Each spoke in both English and Spanish. They took a break every so often and translated what had been said. BASTA’s leaders presented information, answered questions, and talked about current business and next steps.

People wanted to know what was going on: “Do we have all the facts? How much money are they taking? Can you explain my tax bill to me?” Garcia set the agenda and the topics. She had an easel with notepads, and she would break down people’s tax bills. Garcia's ability to explain tax-math to non-English speakers came in handy during BASTA meetings when she had to tell them why Bell's property tax bills were among the highest tax rates in Los Angeles County. To raise money, BASTA volunteers sold tamales at the twice weekly meetings. In deference to their hosts, the tamales were made without pork.

In time, BASTA realized they needed a single spokesperson, lest they be defined by the angry and shouting residents who were hammering the council every chance they got and were popping up in news programs and being quoted in articles about the revolt. They selected Garcia to better control their message when dealing with the media.

The Recall

BASTA people packed the city council chambers and protested in front of city hall twice a week. Even after Rizzo, Spaccia, and Adams resigned, the council members continued to defend their high salaries and refused to step down. Tired of the heckling, the city council refused to meet, which prompted BASTA to launch a recall. “We made two sided yard signs. One side said “resign,” the other, “recall.” We first had people display the ‘Resign’ side with the council member’s name. When the council refused to step down, we flipped them over to ‘Recall,’ said Rodarte.

BASTA set up a small office on Gage Avenue, one of Bell’s main thoroughfares. They filled the small office with four desks and donated computers. Volunteers made phone calls, checked signatures, went over walking lists, and did all the other things the recall required. “We took whatever people were willing to give us,” Garcia said.

Each day for about four weeks two dozen people arrived at BASTA’s headquarters at 9am and then went door to door gathering signatures. Signature gatherers usually get paid for each valid signature they collect. But in Bell they worked for free. “The people were so outraged that it only took us about 25 days to collect all of the signatures,” said Burnside. Some even came to the office to sign the petitions.

The anger fueled interest in the race. By the end of 2010, there were seventeen candidates running for the five seats on the council that would be vacated if the recall was successful.

The election took place on March 8, 2011. It was run by the County--not the city--because residents didn’t trust the City to count the votes, especially since it was the entire council that was being recalled. Turnout was 37%, more than nearly triple Bell’s typical turnout. There were 4 polling sites, and the Times reported that they had lines with as many as a hundred people in them.

When the votes were counted, 90 percent of the voters voted to recall the entire city council. This included Mayor Oscar Hernandez and council members Teresa Jacobo and George Mirabal. Also recalled was Pastor Luis Artiga, who had quit the council the previous year, but remained targeted for recall. Lorenzo Velez, the only councilman not charged in the Bell corruption case, ran for reelection, but was defeated. Jacobo's vacated seat was won by Danny Harber. Artiga's vacated seat was won by Ana Maria Quintana. Ali Saleh, Nestor Valencia and Violeta Alvarez won the other three seats on the city council.

Quintana and Alvarez have a similar life story as the other activists. Quintana’s parents also emigrated from Mexico. After she graduated with honors from Bell High School, she received her BA from Yale and her law degree from Columbia University. Alvarez came to the US from Mexico when she was 14. She graduated from a local high school and received her B.A. degree and later her Master’s. Both Quintana and Alvarez were impelled to run for council because of the corruption scandal.

Not long after the recall, Garcia announced that she was leaving BASTA. The following year she was elected to the California State Assembly, despite being outspent four to one. Valencia, Saleh, and Quintana remain on the council and Valencia and Saleh have served as Bell’s mayor. Walker left Bell and took a job in the entertainment industry in Los Angeles. Rodarte continues running her vintage clothing store in Echo Park.

The Post-Rizzo City Managers

The second group of reformers were the city managers who followed Rizzo. Pedro Carrillo, Ken Hampian, Arne Croce, and Doug Willmore agree that the crisis made it possible to bring about much needed change. As interim city manager Arne Croce said, “Without the crisis the opportunity to do all of the things that were done would never have presented itself.” [[19]](#footnote-19)

The Los Angeles Times city manager 800K story spurred investigations by The Department of Justice, the FBI, IRS, SEC, the California Attorney General, the State Controller’s Office, CalPERS (the state retirement fund), the State Department of Corporations, the Los Angeles District Attorney, and agencies that assign city credit ratings. The scandal was featured on local, national, and international news outlets. The obscure little city, which Rizzo had tried so hard to keep out of the spotlight, was now world famous.

Bell’s mostly low income citizens were enraged when they found out their city manager was making twice the U.S. President’s salary. Hundreds gathered at Bell’s modest, one story city hall carrying signs with photos of Rizzo and the words “Justice,” “Resignation,” and “Recall.” The 85 seat council chamber, built in 1957, wasn’t big enough to hold the heckling crowds, so they moved the council meeting to the community center next door, which was larger and newer.

Speaker after speaker berated the Rizzo council for ripping off the city. “People were furious. There was just pure rage. There was a mob mentality and I worried there’d be violence,” said Pedro Carrillo, the first interim city manager after Rizzo’s ouster. “Cities have mutual aid agreements for emergencies. I must have called mutual aid six times in about three weeks. We were trying to prevent rioting,” he said.

But while the media and the public fixated on the sky-high salaries, the greatest damage inflicted by Rizzo--the four city managers who followed him insist-- came from the absent or rundown government operations, the crippled civic infrastructure, the tons of needless debt the city took on, the deteriorated business climate, and “corruption at its worst.” In many ways, the $5.5 million dollars in excessive salaries was the least of Bell’s problems. In mounting a successful and complete recall, the activists set the stage for the interim and permanent measures undertaken by the city managers.

Pedro Carrillo

A week after the Times story broke, Robert Rizzo, Angela Spaccia, and Randy Adams resigned. That night, in a special council meeting that went to nearly 3am, the council appointed Pedro Carrillo, a consultant under Rizzo, interim city manager, despite the fact that he’d never been a city manager or even an assistant city manager. But City Hall was in chaos and the council was desperate.

Bell’s finances were in shambles and the City was hemorrhaging money. Carrillo immediately reached out to State Controller John Chiang, who sent him several auditors to help decipher Bell’s books and figure out its financial situation. He then eliminated positions, fired people, retired others, and reduced hours. For months, meetings had to be cancelled for lack of a quorum. His job got even harder when, two months after the publication of the Times report, all but one of the Rizzo council members were arrested and banned from City Hall. Carillo was running the city by himself. “I was working 14 hour days, 6-7 days a week. It seemed like every week we encountered another crisis or investigation,” he said.[[20]](#footnote-20)

However, far from being perceived as a hero, Carrillo was thought of as Rizzo’s man. The cuts he made and his desire to save the City millions by shuttering the police department--whose rank and file had funded the recall-- and contracting with another government entity for police services-- made him deeply unpopular. So, following the recall election, which swept away the Rizzo council and put a new group of reformers in office, the council immediately asked Carrillo to do a search for a permanent city manager.

Carrillo opened a search, but no one applied. The deadline was extended, but still no applications came in. Carrillo left the day his contract ended, and Bell was again without a city manager. At this point, Ali Saleh, the newly elected mayor and BASTA co-founder, stepped in as city manager even though he had absolutely no experience in municipal government. The fact that a city councilperson was also the city manager is highly inappropriate, not to mention utterly bizarre. But the city had no choice.

The International City Manager’s Association (ICMA) was deeply embarrassed by Rizzo and the damage he had caused. When Kevin Duggan, the director of ICMA’s west coast division (Cal-ICMA), learned that Bell had not received any applications, he contacted Saleh and offered to organize, pro bono, an effort to find an interim city manager. Duggan worked with the League of Cities and the California City Management Foundation to find an interim city manager. That turned out to be Ken Hampian.

Ken Hampian

San Luis Obispo is 212 miles north and a four hour drive from Bell. Ken Hampian had been its city manager for ten years before retiring. He’d thought of applying for the interim city manager job in Bell, but didn’t want to move away from home for 10 months, which is about how long he thought it would take to hire a full time city manager. “I was proud to have been a city manager, and I was completely offended that Rizzo sullied the reputation of all public servants,” Hampian said. At the urging of Duggan and other colleagues, he moved to the area and worked pro bono for the City for a month. As word got out that Hampian was volunteering in Bell, other retired public servants stepped forward to volunteer time and even equipment. The Santa Monica’s Deputy Chief of Police used vacation time to help out. Among Hampian’s priorities was to find a capable longer term interim manager. With the help of Duggan and others, Arne Croce was recruited and appointed by the Bell City Council to serve as Interim City Manager for the next several months.

Arne Croce

Croce had been San Mateo’s city manager for 18 years before retiring. He was also furious with Rizzo for giving the profession he loved a black eye and felt obligated to help put Bell back on track. Croce put through the first honest and transparent budget the City had seen in years, and included the public for the first time ever in setting community priorities. He spent considerable time sharing the benefit of his experience with the new City Council, including best practices for serving as an elected local government official. He also renegotiated the massive bond debt incurred by Rizzo (discussed below) and found a path out of the burdensome obligations. Croce also dealt with some difficult, remaining personnel issues and helped the City recruit Doug Willmore, who became Bell’s first permanent city manager since Rizzo.

Doug Willmore

Prior to coming to Bell, Willmore was the city manager of the City of El Segundo, also in Los Angeles County. He was fired after only 10 months when he alleged that Chevron owed the city millions in back taxes and proposed a tax hike on the politically powerful oil company. He successfully sued the city for violating anti-retaliation and whistleblower laws. Willmore’s integrity, calm, openness, and toughness were especially attractive to the new Bell council, which was bent on reform and wanted to distance itself from Rizzo.“The problems that Bell faced at that time were massive, and many were unknown. And they were about to become even worse,” he said.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The four city managers faced several big challenges:

1. Fiscal Emergency

No one had a clear picture of the City’s finances--what the city’s assets and liabilities were; what it owed, and to whom, and how much money it had. There was a huge backlog of financial transactions which hadn’t been booked. The city hadn’t reconciled bank statements in three years. “They deposited checks in the bank, but you didn’t know what they were for,” Willmore said. “The City was virtually insolvent without even knowing it,” he said. Also, Willmore found that the City hadn’t been properly audited for years. Auditors keep cities honest and financially sound. A good auditor challenges the people who hired them with the problems they’ve encountered. An auditor would uncover conflict of interest and overcharges, and would report these and other problems to the city manager. The city manager would then report the auditor’s findings and concerns to the City council, along with proposed fixes. This never happened under Rizzo. Instead, the City’s longtime auditor--Mayer Hoffman McCann--had always given it a clean bill of health.

State Controller John Chiang strongly disagreed with their assessment. Chiang said the City’s auditors were a "rubber-stamp." He found very serious problems, including that the City’s internal controls were absent or poor resulting in excessive compensation, illegal taxes, mismanaged bond funds, and questionable contracts and land practices. Chiang said the auditor failed to catch that Rizzo had the City buy property owned by Mayor Oscar Hernandez for an above market price, and that it overpaid by millions of dollars for a building owned by another ex-councilman; or that Rizzo had a side business with a private contractor who was also the city’s planning director; or that the city paid more than $1 million to a law firm that employed Rizzo's soon-to-be second wife. Ultimately when the proper audits were done, it was revealed that the City’s reserves had disappeared and that it was in the red for $1.5 million.

2. No Management Team

There were no long term managers in place. This meant there was no one in a leadership position who could provide information about how things had been done in the past. When Croce arrived, he found that most of Bell’s top managers had left or were under indictment: there was no police chief, finance director, community services director, public works director, or planning director. Moreover, those managers that remained were not especially experienced. “I don’t think you’d find any evidence of adept city management in Bell,” Croce said. “Rizzo put loyalty to him above competence when it came to hiring and promotion decisions,” he said. Croce hired several well-qualified interim department heads who stepped in to begin the rebuilding process. But it was up to Willmore to put a more permanent senior management team in place.

3. Staff Chaos

A well run city requires well-trained and well-motivated staff. However, Rizzo had run City Hall into the ground. Human resources (HR) policies had not been updated since the 1980s, despite the enormous changes that had taken place in HR law since that time. There was no training of staff outside of mandatory state required training. To maintain control, Rizzo discouraged staff from joining professional organizations and participating with their colleagues in professional conferences. Rizzo warned one staff person who did go to a conference, “Don’t speak with anyone. Don’t participate in any groups. Don’t ask any questions. And every time there is a break you call me and give me an update on what you are doing.” During Hampian’s tenure a council member asked for $45 to attend a regional workshop. In searching the budget for training funds, Hampian learned that no money was allocated for training in any City departments, except for the police if the training would be State reimbursed. According to employees, his attitude was “Everything you need to know we can teach you here.” On top of this, after the scandal broke, Bell staff were traumatized by the media spotlight and the tremendous public suspicion of anyone who worked for City Hall. Morale was at rock bottom.

4. Rules and Procedures

Rizzo loved to quote from *The Godfather* and *The Sopranos.* As the tough guy he fashioned himself to be, Rizzo liked to make seat of the pants decisions based on intuition rather than standardized procedures and policies. For example, he alone decided how much local businesses paid for licenses and fees and for code violations, based on how much he thought the business could afford and whether he liked its owners. Written procedures would only limit his power and discretion. As a result, Bell typically didn’t have or adhere to any written rules for such things as purchasing, running council meetings, taking personnel actions, processing development applications, or contracting. One retired volunteer city manager audited city contracts and learned that approximately 75% were expired. This included key contracts like trash collection, graffiti removal, and engineering services. Also, there were no updated job descriptions; often employees had the same job title, but much different duties and compensation. There was no salary schedule or any sort of rational compensation template or any formal agreements with the city’s three main bargaining units.

5. Physical infrastructure

City Hall had none of the tools that a normal office should have. The building, built in the late 1950s, hadn’t been maintained and was in disrepair. Its light blue cinder block walls needed painting, and the heating and air conditioning filters had never been replaced. Rizzo would not allow the carpets, which were filthy, to be cleaned so visitors would think the city was operating on a shoestring budget. Furniture and equipment were worn and outdated. Official city documents -- including employment records, contracts, council minutes, and building permits -- were stuffed into cardboard storage boxes that were piled up against a wall because there weren’t enough filing cabinets. There had been no effort to invest in technology. “Half the emails I got I couldn’t open if they had an attachment because the system was so bad. My phone dropped calls constantly, Hampian said. Croce agreed, saying, ”I was told to clear my voice mail messages because if the system was too full it would slow down 911 coming in the dispatch." Finally, the absence of a computerized information management system hurt the City’s ability to locate important documents.This hurt the City’s ability to defend itself in Court and to keep up with countless public records requests.

6. Lawsuits

The city faced more than 60 legal claims and administrative actions. Some lawsuits could have bankrupted the City. Willmore immediately turned to the City Attorney, David Aleshire, of Aleshire & Wyndner (A&W). Dave Aleshire read about the scandal from his office 40 miles away in Irvine, CA, and had contacted BASTA and offered to help with the recall (pro bono). The firm focused on local government law and was widely known and respected. Following the successful recall, A&W was selected, after a competitive process, to be the City’s attorney. Anthony Taylor was put in charge of corruption related litigation.

Willmore knew he couldn’t fight every legal challenge. That would’ve cost millions, and the City could go bankrupt if it didn’t win. It was also possible that litigation would generate additional legal claims against the City.

Willmore and A&W decided to divide the cases into three categories: litigate, settle, and defer.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Litigate

Among the first to be sued by the City was the former city attorney, Ed Lee. Lee was Bell’s long time city attorney under Rizzo and a partner with the law firm Best, Best and Krieger (BBK). Lee had failed to alert the Council, or anyone else, about the legal shenanigans taking place in Bell--the excessive compensation schemes, the improper employee loan program, and fraudulent contracts. Many people, especially the Bell 8 defendants, believe Lee deserves much of the blame for the scandal because they looked to him for guidance regarding the high salaries. He assured them they weren’t breaking the law. The City recovered $2.5 million for legal malpractice from Lee’s firm, BBK.

The City also received $3 million from its former auditors, Mayer Hoffman McCann, for the City’s claims against them for the corruption scandal.

Willmore and others were appalled by the lawsuits by ex-employees Rizzo, Spaccia, and Adams. Rizzo and Spaccia said they were improperly terminated and sued the city for millions for unpaid wages and benefits. They also claimed that the City should pay their attorney’s fees. Rizzo, Spaccia, and Adams also sued the city for some $6M in future unfunded pension benefits. Rizzo said he was due $600,000 a year pension based on his final pay in Bell. In addition, he was slated to receive payouts from his 401 K retirement plan which once contained more than $1 million, part of it funded by the City based on his exorbitant salary.

“Many of the criminals that had preyed on Bell before the scandal were back to take another chunk out of Bell. The City was never going to pay any of them another dime,” Willmore said. He knew that settling would not produce the justice that the citizens deserved. They were determined to fight.

The City won back all of the improper payments it made into Rizzo’s 401K. He only kept the pre-corruption 401K funds that were legally protected. Most importantly, the state appeals court ruled that Bell did not have to pay Rizzo’s legal bills. Rizzo’s pension was later reduced to $86,598. Spaccia was slated to receive a yearly retirement of nearly $250,000. This was reduced to $23,960. (She would continue to receive a pension from the County of Ventura, where she had formerly worked.) Also, Spaccia was no longer eligible for retiree health coverage from the City.

Former police chief Randy Adams didn’t receive any additional credit toward his pension for his time with Bell. Additionally, as a part of the settlement, Adams actually repaid the City $215,000 in excessive salary and abandoned his claim for reimbursement of $500,000 in legal fees and for another $800,000 in unpaid wages, benefits, and lifetime medical (total $1.3M). He still would receive a pension and health care benefits of more than $200,000 from his previous service in local government.

In addition to their state retirement plan, in 2003 Rizzo created a supplemental plan for himself and 40 other Bell officials. The plan was terminated in 2011, but the City was still on the hook for nearly $6 million. A total of 40 employees receiving benefits sued the City for the termination of benefits. The Court ruled that the plan was not legally established. The City agreed to reduced payouts.

Settle

In the mid-2000s, Rizzo purchased 25 acres of land in what Willmore calls a “misguided investment scheme” for $38 million. As the scandal was unfolding, the City defaulted on the loan to bondholder Dexia, an international bank. Dexia foreclosed on the property and was expected to seek a judgment for the additional $15 million, which would have bankrupted the city. A&W avoided litigation by selling the property along with 14 other acres for $44 million. This allowed the city to pay off the note and put some sorely needed cash in its account. The developer who bought the property built 500,000 square feet of commercial space, generating 350 jobs and tax revenue for the City.

In another poor deal, in 2009 Rizzo paid $4.6 million for a downtown property-- twice what it was worth. The property was owned by an ex-councilman and political wheeler-dealer. The City couldn’t afford the payments, which would have totaled $7 million with interest by the time the loan was paid off. The City defaulted and the property owner sought to foreclose on the property. The City filed a lawsuit to stop the foreclosure and the City won in court when it obtained an injunction to stop it. Thereafter, the City negotiated a settlement that allowed the City to use redevelopment funds, which are separate from the City’s general fund, to purchase the property. The cost to the City’s general fund was zero. The City saved $3 million in payments it didn’t have to make.

Rizzo did the worst long term harm when he pushed through a $70 million bond to finance the construction of a sports complex, a new library, and a community theater. The city eventually issued $50 million in bonds, but taxpayers had to pay back $100 million in principal and interest. To avoid raising taxes, the City abandoned the plan to build the sports park, community center, and library, and used the unspent bond proceeds to prepay the bonds.

Deferral

The City was able to defer litigation for most civil matters with the eight ex-officials until the criminal prosecutions were complete. In addition to buying the City time, it allowed Bell’s attorneys to benefit from legal work done by the District Attorney.

Bell’s attorneys also persuaded the federal (e.g., SEC and IRS) and state agencies (e.g., the State Controller, Attorney General, Department of Corporations) investigating the scandal to help the rebuilding effort rather than take punitive action. The city’s attorney urged authorities not to punish the citizens of Bell for the transgressions of past leaders. For example, the city was set to be penalized by the IRS for $6 million due to not spending the proceeds of the tax exempt bond issue when it was supposed to, due to in part to the scandal. The City was able to settle for paying only $257,000. The City’s attorneys were also able to convince the state Attorney General not to put the City into receivership, but instead to support the City’s efforts to get restitution from the Bell defendants.

7. Civic Infrastructure

Most well run cities have numerous opportunities for citizens to participate in local governance. Cities typically have a planning commission, parks and recreation commission, an architectural design and review board, and a whole host of other boards and committees. These are part of what’s known as a city’s civic infrastructure.

These volunteer groups serve several important functions. First, they lessen the council’s work load and can help absorb political heat. The planning commission, for example, takes the first look at a development project and decides whether it merits further consideration by the council. A larger group of residents, beyond the five elected council members, are thus involved in--and responsible for--major land use decisions, which are usually controversial. Second, these boards and commissions are a “farm team” for future council members. This is where potential council members develop governing skills and knowledge.

In other cities, service clubs (e.g. Rotary, Kiwanis, YMCA, chambers of commerce, etc.) are venues for the discussion of current events, which includes the performance of local government officials. They often hold candidate debates, which provide an opportunity for candidates outside of City Hall to get the exposure they need to mount a successful campaign. It is also a chance for voters to take the measure of potential future elected officials. Service clubs are another venue for future leaders to prove they have what it takes to be on the council. Finally, they provide a forum for the council to hear from the community and for the community to connect with the council. City officials can get feedback from a cross section of the community. Group members, in turn, report back to the community what’s going on at City Hall and how well leaders are doing. They can also be a “watchdog” that “barks” when they sense something is wrong, thus providing an important check on government authorities. The city manager and council members frequently speak to these groups and keep them abreast of what the City plans.

Under Rizzo, civic clubs and organizations had all but ceased to exist in Bell. There were no state of the city addresses or prayer breakfasts or other forums in which people congregate and discuss issues of concern to the community. There was a chamber of commerce, but it was “owned” by the city: the executive director--typically an independent position--was under the control of Rizzo and never gave any contrary opinions. In fact, Rizzo, for a time, served as the chamber’s executive director. Willmore said the chamber of commerce was a pack of “Rizzo stooges.” The dissolution of the chamber further crippled Bell’s business environment. Big Box stores, such as Home Depot and Walmart, whose tax revenues help the City pay its bills, avoided Bell.

Croce said “The money Rizzo stole was the least damaging thing he did to Bell...The most damaging thing he did was robbing the community of its civic infrastructure.”

Thus, there was no way for any citizen to get involved in city government other than by getting on the Council. But since Rizzo wanted to run everything, he had to heavily manage the selection process. He did this by recruiting the people he could intimidate and control on the council and orchestrating the defeat of those who he thought would oppose him. He played an active role in council discussions regarding who to appoint to the council when unscheduled openings arose. As Rizzo appointed incumbents, officials such as Victor Bello, a telephone installer, and local pastor Luis Artiga enjoyed a significant electoral advantage over any real or potential challengers--despite their dubious qualifications. Mayor Oscar Hernandez could neither read nor write English and signed pretty much everything Rizzo put in front of him. The other council members were unwilling to challenge their city manager or rein him in when questions regarding his behavior arose.

Rizzo didn’t want a spark plug like Nestor Valencia, the founder of the Bell Resident’s Club or the charismatic and outspoken Ali Saleh, the cofounder of BASTA, asking him tough questions.

Because there was no effort to groom future leaders, there was no bench to go to when there were council vacancies. So, when the recall election came about, none of the people elected had any local government experience. This meant that there was no institutional history which could be passed down from senior members to junior members and to the city manager and city attorney. They were starting from scratch.

8. No Transparency

Democracy requires a well informed public. This means city operations have to be transparent. Rizzo, however, despised transparency and did all he could to keep city operations secret. He tried to intimidate people from looking too closely into how the City functioned. He did this by taking note of those who showed up to council meetings, especially if they spoke. When people asked for documents or asked tough questions, Rizzo and the council members were not forthcoming, responded with insults, and often lied. Public meetings were not video recorded. For a long time, the City didn’t have a website, and when it finally built one, it was poorly done. Rizzo had no interest in following the Public Records Request Act, which guaranteed citizens the right to public documents.

9. Ethics Problems

Obviously, Bell had very serious ethics problems. According to a report by the Center for the Advancement of Public Integrity, small municipalities like Bell are big corruption risks because there isn’t proper oversight by county, state, and federal levels of government. The report says that “...[B]ell did not have any formal anti-corruption mechanisms in place — particularly oversight and transparency measures — so no one outside of the small group of decision makers running Bell had the ability or duty to ensure that the city’s leaders were governing with integrity.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

10. Trust Deficit

Rizzo had destroyed citizen trust and confidence. The recall election united the community, and the newly elected council members were at first treated as heroes. However, that didn’t last long. Soon residents began yelling at the council and saying they were just as corrupt as Rizzo and that they weren’t listening. There was a tremendous need to restore trust and inculcate within the community the desire to engage properly with the council and one another -- what Alexis de Tocqueville called the “habits of the heart.”

Conclusion

In February 2015, four and half years after the scandal first erupted, Bell had largely recovered from the harm inflicted on it by its former top officials due to the hard work of the post-Rizzo city managers and council, and its city attorney. As of January 2017, the City was solvent and had a very healthy $19 million in reserves ($13.2 million annual budget). Audits were done on a regular basis by a respected accounting firm, and there were no outstanding scandal related lawsuits or pending administrative actions.

As part of the rebuilding effort, the City adopted a Strategic Plan in May 2016. One of its priorities was that there should be a strong management team. There is now a comprehensive hiring process. Positions are widely advertised and finalists go through a rigorous background check. A rating panel, which includes top managers from other cities, interviews candidates and makes recommendations. Also, the City created the Bell Leadership Academy for continued professional development. The Leadership Academy is an eight session program (each session is four hours) developed to improve city management. Directors and managers of each department participate in this training. City employees are now encouraged to go to conferences and participate in their professional associations.

The City has adopted rules and procedures for the acquisition of equipment and services and the conduct of financial affairs. The council adopted formal procedures for the conduct of meetings, which it scrupulously follows. Each department has created or updated its own policies and procedures, and an internal system ensures that contracts don’t lapse.

City staff is “hyper-vigilant” about financial matters given past abuses, the current city manager, Howard Brown said. “If I ask them to move money from one account to another, they’ll say we didn’t see the council pass a resolution about that at the last City council meeting, which many watch at home online.”

City Hall has been repainted and carpets have been replaced. New computers, software, and office furniture have been purchased, and a state of the art phone system has been installed. There is a plan in place that ensures computers and other technology are updated in a timely manner.

The Strategic Plan also emphasized the importance of civic engagement. The City created a number of committees and task forces (e.g., code enforcement task force, planning commission, and the chamber of commerce) that are all comprised of Bell residents and local business owners. The city manager regularly meets with resident groups. The city parks and recreation department created 40 new clubs and organizations for Bell’s residents. This is up from just a handful under Rizzo.

To better engage the public and foster a more participatory relationship between City Hall and its residents, the City held a “Goal-Setting Community Forum” around the city’s budget. Residents received a brief overview of the City’s finances. Residents then deliberated over budget priorities, with subjects ranging from public safety to business permitting to taxes. The City also hosts community events such as the State of the City Address, Holiday Tree Lighting Ceremony, Mayor’s Cleanup, Small Business Development Workshop, and 5K Run/Walk.

Believing that sunlight is the best disinfectant, the City has a state of the art website to provide easily accessible information to the public. The website includes salaries, budget, itemized spending, staff reports, city contracts, council minutes and documents, the city manager’s bi-monthly report to the council, and the municipal code. City council meetings are streamed live and videotaped for future viewing. The City’s social media outlets (Facebook, Twitter) transmit updates and promote events. The Sunshine Review, a non-profit that examines state and local government transparency, gave the new website an “A-” for transparency.

In regards to ethics, the City adopted a Policy for Fraudulent or Unethical Behavior which covers all employees, management, elected officials, volunteers, vendors, and contractors. After a comprehensive review of the City’s ethics reforms, The Center for the Advancement of Public Integrity concluded: “... [A] review of the three cornerstones of municipal integrity -- Accountability, Oversight, and Transparency -- reveals a concerted effort on the part of Bell to tighten ethics requirements, ensure some level of oversight, and increase transparency.”

Bell has come a long way, but it still faces some challenges. The City owes $30 million for the construction bond and the purchase of a downtown business property, which is now worth half of what Rizzo purchased it for. Like many cities, Bell has a huge unfunded pension liability. There is high turnover because too officials regularly leave for better paying jobs in wealthier cities. The City is still debating whether to have its own police department or outsource police services to the county or another city.

Voter turnout, as in the rest of the country, remains a challenge. In the 2013 and 2015 municipal elections, turnout was about 15%. That’s down from the 30% that voted in the recall election but above the low teens and single digits in the Rizzo era. In 2013, 11 candidates vied for three slots on the council. That’s far better than pre-recall elections when only Rizzo backed candidates ran, and elections were frequently cancelled for lack of interest. Of course, the city manager stays out of election politicking.

All indicators suggest that Bell has recovered and, in some ways, has become a model for municipal governance.

Up to this point I’ve argued that the activists and the city managers put the crisis to good use. Things have turned out well for Bell. But this happy ending was not inevitable. For example, had the recall failed, as most do, Rizzo and his friends would have remained in power and the corruption would have continued. Also, if less competent city managers followed Rizzo’s ouster, Bell would likely have gone bankrupt and possibly been taken over by the state.

Short of that, real damage could have been done to the leader’s reputations and whatever changes they brought about would have been short lived. The point being that crises require the right leaders to achieve good ends. Fortunately, Bell had such leaders.

The five activists and four city managers chronicled in this paper had some things in common. They were competent, embarrassed by the scandal, and were drawn to a challenge.

The BASTA leaders had excellent political skills, including timing, strategic thinking, coalition building, communications, organizing, and media relations. The city managers had years of experience in multiple jurisdictions. They quickly diagnosed problems and implemented solutions.

Both the activists and the city managers also hired well. BASTA hired a professional political consultant to run the recall. The city managers built a strong staff, including a top notch city attorney who won back millions of dollars. He also saved the city millions.

Also, both groups were deeply embarrassed by the scandal. Rizzo had disgraced the activists’ community, a deep wound to their civic pride. The once obscure city was now widely known as the place where the city manager ripped off poor residents because not enough people paid attention to City Hall. Rizzo was also a huge embarrassment to city managers and other local government officials. Hampian, as noted above, worked for free, and he and Willmore received the California International City Managers Association ethics award. [[24]](#footnote-24) Others, such as Santa Monica deputy police chief Al Venegas, volunteered their time.

Both groups also enjoyed a challenge: the activists wanted to flex their new -found political chops by toppling a corrupt regime. The city managers wanted to rebuild Bell because that was the right thing to do, but also because doing so required the full use of their professional experience, skills, and talents. The crisis afforded both groups the opportunity to satisfy these personal goals while serving the public good.

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