

Editorial

The lesson of Bell: A watchful citizenry is still crucial

Rizzo and Spaccia will pay for their crimes. Reforms are in place. But that doesn't mean it couldn't happen again.

By The Times editorial board

December 11, 2013

The conviction this week of former Assistant City Manager Angela Spaccia for plundering the small working-class city of Bell to enrich herself — along with former City Manager Robert Rizzo's plea to 69 similar charges in October — closes one of the final chapters in the long-running graft-and-corruption scandal. The two masterminds now face sentences of up to 12 years in prison.

Spaccia was found guilty of 11 felony counts Monday, including misappropriation of public funds, conflict of interest and concealing public documents. During the 4 1/2-week trial, prosecutors and witnesses detailed how she and Rizzo managed to siphon more and more money from public coffers.

Spaccia, for example, was paid for a full 18 months when she wasn't working; she didn't use a single sick day or vacation day. Rizzo and Spaccia also awarded themselves 33 hours of vacation time every two weeks. They buried their total compensation in various reports and documents, making it extremely difficult for anyone to figure out how much they were earning. By the end of his time in Bell, Rizzo earned \$1.18 million a year in salary, vacation and sick leave payouts. Spaccia earned \$564,000 annually.

It's satisfying to see Rizzo and Spaccia pay for their greed and their disregard for the common good. But justice isn't enough. Bell fell prey to these thieves because government stopped answering to the public, and because an apathetic public failed to question the government. As Rizzo and Spaccia go off to prison, it's important to ask: Have we learned the lessons of Bell? And have we made the changes necessary to prevent another such scandal?

There was a flurry of legislation passed after The Times exposed the corruption in Bell. Former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and Gov. Jerry Brown signed off on more than a dozen changes to state law. Among other things, they created an agency within the state auditor's office to scrutinize cities, counties or special districts at high risk of waste, fraud or abuse; enacted restrictions on automatic raises for managers; required CalPERS, the state retirement system, to monitor for excessive salary increases; and required employees to repay paid leave or settlements if convicted of a crime related to his or her job.

Source: latimes.com/opinion/editorials/la-ed-bell-trial-20131211,0,3004401.story, retrieved 12-11-2013 at 07:24 AM

State Controller John Chiang ordered cities, counties and special districts to regularly report payroll data, and his office created a government compensation database that has gotten near 7 million hits since 2010. And the city of Bell has begun airing council meetings live on its website, as well as posting financial data, vendor contracts and other public documents online.

Will these reforms prevent the next Bell? Maybe not. A corrupt official intent on stealing public funds can often find a way to do it. But the laws passed in recent years will help by allowing more eyes on public money. Still, the most valuable lesson to be learned is that democracy requires citizens to be involved and to ask questions. **There will always be venality and theft, but gadflies, whistle-blowers and a watchful citizenry are still the best backstop on corruption.**

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