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Bell Scandal Serves Up a Civics Lesson

By **TAMARA AUDI**

BELL, Calif.—There are hardly any toddlers at Little Bear Park. Around town, lawns need watering, homework and bedtimes are put off, dinners delayed.

People are simply too busy.

Busy Mobilizing in Bell



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David McNew for The Wall Street Journal

With four of Bell's five elected officials sent to jail amid a pay scandal, there is a lot that needs doing. There are petitions to circulate and late-night meetings to attend. Volunteers lash red signs—"RESIGN"—to fences and windows of the dust-colored stucco houses and crowded apartment buildings in this blue-collar Los Angeles suburb.

Daily audit reports describe in jaw-tightening, head-shaking detail the millions of dollars residents were allegedly overcharged in taxes and fees by officials who were taking home kingly salaries.

Busiest of all may be Bell's only elected official not accused of wrongdoing in criminal or civil court. "I'm running on coffee and vitamins," says Lorenzo Velez, at his second late-night community meeting of the week.

Mr. Velez, 55 years old, is the only council member who isn't either in jail, charged with a crime or named in a lawsuit filed by the state attorney general. "And he won't be," his daughter, Sonia Velez, says firmly. While other city-council members paid themselves close to \$100,000 a year, Mr. Velez received a \$620-a-month stipend for his services.

Mr. Velez was a political novice when he joined the council and felt like an outsider during his yearlong tenure. He pushed for town-hall meetings and transparency, he says, but the two professional city managers and four other city council members objected. "It was always me

against six people," he says.

That helps explain why Mr. Velez can claim to be as shocked as anyone to learn of his colleagues' astronomical salaries. "I'm still digesting this," he says, sipping another Styrofoam cup of bland coffee.

His day job operating heavy equipment for the City of Los Angeles starts at 6 a.m. Because the work is loud and physical, Mr. Velez sets his phone to vibrate so he knows when the city attorney or city manager needs him—often a few times a day.

During his 35 years in Bell, Mr. Velez coached baseball and softball, ran the youth sports association and was PTA president at his two children's school, but didn't get involved in politics until last year. Neighbors urged him to apply for a city-council vacancy following the sudden retirement of Victor Bello—who is among the six men and two women facing fraud charges.

"I have no ill feelings for anyone," Mr. Velez says. "The lord will judge."

Meanwhile, the part-time post now consumes his days, between meetings with lawyers and the remnants of city government. Resolutions still must be passed and decisions made about problems with the firm managing a mobile-home park and whether to extend city-hall hours.

Some 140 people packed a recent meeting with the police department—about 100 more than showed up for last month's. "We all had to wake up to what was going on," says Adriana Miramontes, who made a point of attending but had to fight to stay awake. Her shift as a machine operator starts a 4 a.m.

Between the bigger meetings, there are gatherings of small political clagues at the city's restaurants, over glasses filled with shrimp swimming in spicy red sauce, topped with deep green avocado chunks.

And every day, there is more news of the "Bell Eight," the four current and four former city officials—including a pastor, a popular corner-store owner, the mortuary owner—who were arrested and charged this past week with defrauding residents of \$5.5 million and using tax coffers as personal piggy banks. The scandal forced a city of 37,000 to drop what it was doing, and start paying attention.

"It's hectic. There's so much going on now it's hard to keep up," says John Santana, a 21-year-old college student putting off homework to collect signatures for a petition to recall city-council members. "This is my first time collecting signatures or doing anything like this."

His progress was stalled by an increasingly common oddity in Bell these days: a glut of petition-pushing volunteers converging on the same house.

"Wait, what's this one for?" Carmen Alcala calls out to Mr. Santana, standing in front of her home. He explains that although the mayor and three other city-council members are charged with fraud, they still hold office and refuse to resign. "What?" Ms. Alcala shouts. "Really?"

She and her three sisters sign Mr. Santana's petition, after they are done signing one against

putting Bell into receivership. That one is proffered by Laura Reyes, who normally would be home feeding her daughters and helping with homework.

"I just couldn't stand by and do nothing," she says. "Maybe this is why we're in this situation now, we didn't ask the questions we should have years ago."

This is what flabbergasted relatives and friends say when they call from Mexico and Honduras and Glendale and Los Angeles, just a few miles north. How was it, they ask, that Bell residents didn't know that the former city manager was being paid \$800,000 a year?

"Everyone outside Bell says 'It's your fault, you didn't do anything,' " says Gabriela Bernal, a grocery-store clerk. She asks them how much heed they pay to their city government.

Martha Orozco says she did start to ask questions, going to City Hall to inquire why her son's property taxes skyrocketed while property values fell. But she got no real answer.

"I ask them a question at the city, they tell you go to the county. The county tells you go to the city," she says. "They treat you like a football....kick you from one place to another."

Residents may have assumed a false sense of well-being because the city continued to provide decent services and relatively safe neighborhoods. Bell is sprinkled with neat parks and athletic fields. Roads are freshly paved, and most sidewalks are free of the graffiti and fliers that litter many nearby cities. City Hall is flanked by a skate park and a brightly lit soccer field.

"Everything was good, I thought," says Rodrigo Rodarte. "For 31 years that I lived here, I never went to a city-council meeting."

He was busy raising two children and running an export business. Now, he is gathering signatures for the recall and is a regular at council meetings. Later, he will try to stop by two community meetings scheduled for the same night.

Mr. Rodarte looks at a lush lawn at the house where he is about to ask for a signature. "My yard...I should be watering it. The trash needs to go out..." Then, with a sigh, he says, "Later. I'll do it later."

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