The early 21st century has not been kind to California's reputation for good government. The Golden State's governance flaws reflect worrisome national trends with origins in the 1970s and 1980s. Growing voter distrust with government, a demand for services but not taxes to pay for them, a sharp decline in enlightened leadership and effective civic watchdogs, and dysfunctional political institutions have all contributed to the current governance malaise. Until recently, San Diego, California—America's 8th largest city—seemed immune to such systematic governance disorders. This sunny beach town entered the 1990s proclaiming to be "America's Finest City," but in a few short years its reputation went from "Futureville" to "Enron-by-the-Sea." In this eye-opening and telling narrative, Steven P. Erie, Vladimir Kogan, and Scott A. MacKenzie mix policy analysis, political theory, and history to explore and explain the unintended but largely predictable failures of governance in San Diego.

Far from a sunny story of paradise and prosperity, this account takes stock of an important but understudied city, its failed civic leadership, and poorly performing institutions, policymaking, and planning. Though the extent of these failures may place San Diego in a league of its own, other cities are experiencing similar challenges and political changes. As such, this tale of civic woe offers valuable lessons for urban scholars, practitioners, and general audiences concerned about the future of their own cities.

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