“Whiskey’s for drinking, and water’s for fighting over.” So the saying goes, and it neatly sums up the situation in Tucson in the early 1990s when the attempt was made to switch from groundwater to CAP (Central Arizona Project) water. As longtime Tucsonans will recall, the CAP rollout was an epic failure. The water smelled bad and ran from faucets in a rainbow of unsightly colors from yellow to dark brown. It ruined clothes, damaged appliances and ate through pipes that flooded homes. The populace was in an uproar, the politicians were in a frenzy, and the water company was, well, ineffectual. Finally, the city opted to take CAP back offline, but that didn’t solve the Old Pueblo’s crisis of dwindling groundwater resources; plus, Tucson’s non-participation threatened to bankrupt the CAP.

Into this existential crisis came authors Mike McGuire and Marie Pearthree, civil and environmental engineers and water utility professionals who were part of the coalition that reversed the transition’s death spiral and turned it into a success. But this is not a belated victory lap. Rather, the authors’ intent is to understand and document, nearly 30 years later, exactly what transpired from start to finish. With this scrupulously researched, well-organized, and highly readable book, they do just that. Beginning with a historical overview of water delivery in the Tucson basin, the authors explore the perfect storm of aging infrastructure, technical failures, and toxic management culture that resulted in a public relations nightmare, and the subsequent remediation that produced a functioning water system. Perhaps most importantly, they provide a fascinating examination of how public trust is destroyed and rebuilt. Municipalities confronting water delivery issues will benefit from this object lesson and Tucsonans, particularly old-timers who experienced the CAP debacle firsthand as Pearthree did, will be fascinated by what actually went down.