

Chapter III

PROVIDING URBAN SERVICES: THE CASE OF WATER SUPPLY AND POLLUTION

The rapid development of metropolitan areas has brought with it sharply increasing demands for public services. Population growth alone has meant that there are more schoolchildren, more commuters, and more households requiring public services than ever before. But the accelerating demand reflects more than a simple increase in the number of people. In addition to population growth, there has been a vast outward movement of people to fringe areas where public services were formerly not available or were provided only on a limited scale. As a result, new government institutions had to be organized or old ones expanded to provide new school systems, utilities, and other services. Further, this growth has come at a time of rising standards of living for most Americans, and is closely associated with the rising expectations of millions of families who move from rural areas to the cities and from central cities to the suburbs in search of improved living conditions. Rising expectations apply as well to the public sector and create pressures for not only more public services but higher quality public services: better schools, better transportation, better hospitals.

An important test of the adequacy of government in metropolitan areas is its ability to meet the contemporary challenge of population growth, suburban development, and rising service demands. Local governments provide a broad range of services. Fifteen different functions account for more than 85 percent of direct general expenditures by local governments in the United States: Education, police and fire protection, transportation, water supply and sewage disposal, welfare, hospitals and medical care facilities, housing, urban renewal, libraries, parks and recreation, planning, health, refuse collection and disposal, and air pollution control.

The impact of metropolitan development extends to all these functions, and an adequate level of performance implies meeting increasing needs across this entire range of services. Although the overall performance of the governmental system is difficult to assess, a useful evaluation can be made by looking closely at the way in which rising demands for one particular service have been handled within metropolitan areas. The effects of new service demands upon a complex structure of local government are nowhere clearer than in the case of water supply and the closely associated function of sewage disposal. It is well within the technical and economic capacity of our metropolitan areas to develop dependable sources of pure water and to make reasonable provision for disposing of liquid wastes. Yet chronic water shortages, problems with the quality of drinking water, and polluted rivers and streams continue to plague cities and suburbs throughout the country. The inadequacy of strictly local approaches,