

# Reduced Need for Metropolitan Restructuring

**G. Ross Stephens**

The last period in which there was considerable activity and interest in the way metropolitan areas were governed was the 1950s and the early 1960s. Since that time, the metropolitan governmental mosaic, and the fabric around it, has become considerably more complex and pervasive—and probably more difficult to comprehend and rationalize. Over the last four decades, there have been major changes in factors that affect the role of local governments. Government and governance of the nation's urban regions during that period have been continually improvised in order to adapt.

In 1952, one out of two Americans lived in metropolitan areas. Today it is four out of five. The number of metropolitan areas increased by 46 percent, and metropolitan population rose 133 percent. Over this period, the number of local governments in metropolitan areas doubled from 16,600 to 33,000. Furthermore, there was a massive increase in the number of personnel in the public bureaucracy from 10.7 to 19.8 million personnel (including military). All levels of government have increased their activity as a percent of the gross national product.

We have a system of add-on, ad hoc local government. This was certainly one of the themes of Victor Jones in *Metropolitan Government* (1942), but it is far more appropriate today. We can decry the lack of symmetry in the way metropolitan areas are

governed and the failure of governmental reform movements, but the need for major restructuring to a considerable extent has been defused by all this change.

State and federal governments have assumed greater responsibility for financing and delivering public services (constant dollar federal and state grants to local government increased 5.7 times between 1952 and 1992). The impetus for reform in order to satisfy services demands has been blunted with the creation of massive numbers of special district governments particularly in metropolitan areas to solve some basic service problems, particularly those that Oliver Williams called "life-style" services (between 1952 and 1992 the number increased 5.1 times in metro areas compared to less than doubling in non-metropolitan areas). Larger local governments, counties particularly, have assumed greater responsibility for basic areawide and supplemental public services outside the core city and in unincorporated places. Also, services that were once considered the prerogative of local governments have been assumed by private residential community associations (RCAs), sometimes called "home-owners associations," in order to control "life-style" type services and avoid "sharing the wealth" with larger local units (projecting the data of the Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations [ACIR], there may be as many as 180,000 RCAs in 1996).

Privatization to for-profit business firms remains a major trend. Formal and informal interlocal contracts and cooperation have grown in usage. Finally, there exist larger and increasingly professional state, suburban, and rural bureaucracies (for the 1952-1992 period, local public employment in suburban county areas increased by 155 percent compared to a central county area figure of 49 percent). Then came another wrinkle, *Baker vs. Carr* in 1962 and representation on the basis of population. In the 1950s, we decried the underrepresentation of urban areas in state legislatures and Congress. Based on the 1990 population distribution by state, central cities and minority populations are heavily underrepresented in state legislatures while suburban and rural small town areas are overrepresented. This is true not only in the state halls, but in the U.S. Senate, and, because the state legislatures redistrict Congress, in all probability to the U.S. House of Representatives. (Stephens, 1996)

In terms of both the allocation of resources and the delivery of public services, local governments have declined from the dominant position relative to the states and the nation to a distinctly minor role. Between 1913<sup>1</sup> and 1992, for the allocation of resources, the local share of total government activity has gone from 60.5 percent to 19.1 percent and for domestic public services from a 74.3 percent share to 22.7 percent. Between 1913 and 1992 for the delivery of public services, the local share of total government activity has gone from 65.7 percent to 25.5 percent and for domestic public services from 79.3 percent to 32.9 percent. Over the course of the Twentieth Century, from 1902 to FY 1997 estimates, the role of government finances (averaging own revenues and direct expenditures) as a percent of gross national product (GNP) has grown at all levels of government, but these changes vary widely by level. Total govern-

ment finances as a percentage of GNP increased 6 times while the federal expanded 7.6 times (4 times as fast as local), the state multiplied 11 times (6 times as fast as local), and the local expanded the least at 1.8 percent. Today, in a relative sense at least, local government is a mere shadow of its former self. Even with federal downsizing, larger governments have taken up much of the slack in both allocating resources and delivering public services. We have gone from what Henry Schmandt and John Goldbach (1969) called the "political city" through the "administrative city" and the "contract city" to the "dependent city."

In 1969, Henry J. Schmandt and John C. Goldbach developed a conceptual model of the trends for local government that described Twentieth Century changes in the role of local government vis-a-vis that for extralocal governments (states and the nation). They used "city" as a generic term for local government and traced some of the changes in the distributive system (allocation of resources) and the delivery system (delivery of public services) to classify the role of local government as against extralocal units.

The political city existed at the turn of the century and both allocated whatever resources were available at that time and delivered public services. Schmandt and Goldbach suggested either that the political city has given way to the "administrative city" where the allocation of resources has been increasingly an extralocal function with service delivery remaining local and/or the political city has given way to the "contract city" that contracts with other local governments for service delivery (example, Lakewood, California). The ultimate in this progression is the "dependent city" where both the allocation of resources and the delivery of services are primarily the function of extralocal governments.

Professors Schmandt and Goldbach did not envision the extensive increase in the use of private contractors for the delivery of public services by local governments, and the massive increase in the use of residential community associations (RCAs), often called homeowners associations, i.e., private governments that deliver services once considered the prerogative of local government. According to ACIR (1989), the number of RCAs increased from less than 5,000 in 1960 to 130,000 by 1989. If this rate of increase has been maintained, there are over 180,000 RCAs in 1996. Many deliver only a few services while others perform a rather wide range of what were once considered public services, mostly by contracting to private firms or local governments for these services.

We have come a long way toward what Schmandt and Goldbach called the "dependent city" with extralocal governments controlling both the distribution of resources and the allocation of public services. From this, we can conclude that there has been a substantial relative decline in both the authority and responsibility of local government in the United States.

In short: local governments have changed drastically over time; the 1990 pat-

tern of population distribution distorts the system of representation in our federal system by underrepresenting central cities and overrepresenting suburban and rural small town areas in the U.S. Senate and probably the state houses and the U.S. House of Representatives; and the updated Schmandt/Goldbach model shows the changes in the role played by local governments in the U.S. vis-a-vis larger governments.

These factors all tend to mitigate the need of major metropolitan governmental restructuring. Perhaps from this the most we can expect from metropolitan governmental reform is a minor tweaking here and there. Local government is much more complex today, but, in one sense, a mere shadow of its former self relative to the roles played by others in the intergovernmental arena. ■

#### Note

1. The year 1913 is used as the base year, because data for 1902, the earliest year available, are still affected by the winding down of the federal role that resulted from the Spanish-American War.

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