

My name is Danielle Gallet and I am a water resource strategist and urban planner who has worked nationally and regionally on issues related to water management for over 10 years. I work for the Metropolitan Planning Council (MPC), an over 80 year old non-profit organization focused on achieving a more sustainable, prosperous and equitable NE IL region. I direct and oversee our water program.

Drinking water service is a foundational element of livable communities, and protecting our citizens—both in keeping them safe, and avoiding unnecessary rate escalation are important. I would like to speak to the larger context that has manifested the issues we are seeing today.

Fragmentation
1. Most municipalities operate their own water utilities, and there are approximately 160 community water systems operating in Cook County today. These systems were designed at different times and have been maintained at different degrees. The result is widely different asset management practices and water rate setting. This fragmentation of service hinders communities in being able to capitalize on economies of scale and cost sharing through a more regionalized approach, which can spread these costs out across a larger, more economically diverse population.

Inequity & Lack of best practice
2. Data suggests those with the least are being asked to pay the most for water service in our region. Many low-income, majority-minority communities have meager sales tax bases, with residents and businesses who are often paying property taxes to more than a dozen separate units of local government. Water rates should reflect only infrastructure and service related needs, yet many municipalities mine the revenue generated from water usage to pay for other municipal budget items. With few options for revenues, the heart of the problem is tax policy and piecemeal governance.

Old infra. & diminishing funding
3. Much of the water infrastructure in our region was built out and federally financed many decades ago. The burden to invest in upgrades and needed improvements to our water systems has now shifted to local government and today's residents. The State Revolving Fund program here in Illinois offers low-interest loans for drinking water infrastructure investments which can help, but help is needed.

So what can Cook County do?

- Explore use of CDGB grants to help communities with pre-planning needed for State Revolving Fund applications
- Explore use of CDGB for water rate, service sharing and regionalization studies
- Support current research efforts underway on how service sharing and regionalization can benefit communities today
- Staff an "expert on loan" program to assist vulnerable communities in ensuring best practices are being followed for water system management and water rate setting
- Encourage all community leaders and elected officials to read and use Drinking Water 1-2-3: a free, just released guide for elected officials and community leaders on drinking water management in NE IL that MPC just produced

MPC is willing to be a resource as Cook County moves forward with solutions, please feel free to reach out to us. Thank you.