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WATER WISDOM

THANKS TO conservation and the repair of leaky pipes, the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority has enough reserve capacity to invite more towns and cities to join the 48 it now supplies. Bringing in new members would be a financial plus for the MWRA and for homeowners, who would benefit from new customers sharing the system's fixed costs. But any substantial expansion of MWRA service should meet environmental and smart-growth standards.

The safe yield for the system's two reservoirs, Quabbin and Wachusett, is about 300 million gallons per day. Last year, demand averaged 225.28 million gallons. In the bad old days of the 1980s, the state was using 340 million gallons, above safe yield, and had to choose between the diversion of Connecticut River water into Quabbin or conservation.

Wisely, it chose the latter and brought down consumption. Since then improvements in the water-supply system and waste-water treatment have pushed up rates. Recently, the MWRA board, sensitive to the pressure of those rates, has made it clear that it is receptive to an expansion of the service area that would draw up to about 10 million additional gallons per day.

Handled correctly, a modest expansion could achieve both environmental and smart-

growth goals. By relying at least partially on MWRA water, North Shore communities could depend less on wells that draw from the same groundwater sources as the usually depleted Ipswich River. Both wildlife habitat and river recreation will benefit if the Ipswich and other stressed river basins in Eastern Massachusetts get some relief.

But state officials should also use water to advance the sustainable development principles that underlie the state's

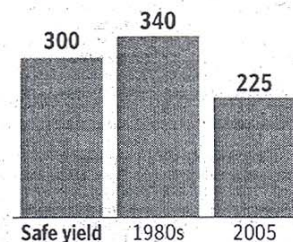
smart-growth strategy. A strong preference should be established for granting MWRA membership to towns planning to steer growth toward transit centers or redevelopment of built-up areas, and away from the state's vanishing open space. "We endorse the principles of smart growth," said Fred Laskey, the MWRA executive director. "How to implement it has to be figured out."

MWRA has scheduled an open forum for late in June to allow groups like the Metro-

politan Area Planning Council, representatives of the river watershed associations, environmental activists, and others to offer their views. The MWRA expansion proposal could be a catalyst for the formation of a long-overdue policy to ensure that water distribution is in line with transportation decision-making and housing development in curbing the sprawl that squanders the two most basic natural resources: water and land.

DEMAND FOR MWRA WATER

Average daily demand in millions of gallons



SOURCE: Massachusetts Water Resources Authority

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