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The Public Ought to Know: Clean fuel a breath of fresh air for choking masses

By Corey Bearak 07/24/2003



Corey Bearak

Most folks, if they stay in town, enjoy summer. Yeah, some of us hate the heat, but we enjoy driving with our windows down (unless garbed up in suits); we like walking under cool tree-lined streets, a characteristic I particularly enjoy about many streets in Queens. We frolic in parks and at beaches. You get the picture.

Then a truck or bus spewing heavy diesel fumes passes by, or something worse stops near you. This summertime feature we forget about during cold weather months, with our windows closed and our strolls shorter (if at all). When we look to “get a breath of fresh air,” as goes the song, clean air may not enter our lungs.

So, 30 years after the Clean Air Act became law, many New Yorkers still breathe some of the foulest air in the nation. New Yorkers suffer respiratory ailments, including asthma, that worsen and can result from air pollution, most of it from heavy trucks and buses. Massive noxious emissions from diesel buses, trucks or cars (and power plants — the subject of a future column) not only contribute to smog but trigger asthma attacks and cause cancer.

Anti-pollution devices in most passenger cars help a lot, as did the 1993 shutdown of apartment house incinerators mandated by 1989 Local Law 39 on which I worked. I recall much cleaner air than when I lived in Langdale Gardens in New Hyde Park in easternmost Queens.

More than one million asthmatics live in our city, including 500,000 children. A lot of New York children still suffer pollution’s worst effects. The city’s 2000/2001 Social Indicators Report finds asthma to be the leading cause of hospitalizations for our children; it also represents the No. 1 pediatric admission diagnosis to municipal hospitals.

In 1999, poorer children in the city suffered from asthma more than double the national average — 3.7 hospitalizations per 1,000 children — but in New York City that number was 9.94 per 1,000 children and 20 times that of affluent areas.

Young people in lower-income neighborhoods live near major highways and interchanges as well as major freight distribution centers. This includes areas such as Hunt’s Point in The Bronx, Upper Manhattan and the Lower East Side. Diesel tailpipes cause more than 50 percent of particulate emissions in Midtown Manhattan.

Inform, a non-profit national environmental research organization, reviewed school buses a few years back. New York state allows its 55,000 school buses, one of every 10 in our nation, to foul our air while they transport our kids. Our city's Department of Education alone controls 5,500 school buses. The Inform report found only one electric public school demonstration bus and four private school buses operating on clean fuels in the city. Last week, school bus operators outside the city agreed to install pollution controls in 15,000 buses over three years.

Things can get better if trucks and buses operate using clean fuels. Clean fuels include natural gas and electricity, as well as new technologies that allow vehicles to operate on existing fuels but with little or no noxious emissions. Examples include traps to capture diesel particulates and hybrid gas-electric vehicles. A shift to more clean fuel vehicles, also known as alternative fuel vehicles, or AFVs, reduces air pollution and related health risks and often reduces vehicle maintenance and health care costs.

In 2000, the federal government projected that the use of clean fuels and AFVs annually would net \$10.3 billion in economic benefit, as well as up to \$3.7 billion in emission reduction benefits by 2010.

1991 Local Law 6 required city AFVs purchases. I worked on this law and recall the compromise that excluded emergency and heavy vehicles (ambulances, patrol cars and sanitation trucks). It did require reports and envisioned a long-term plan. More than a decade later, we are still waiting. Only last year, New York City finally joined the Federal Clean Cities program.

To reduce mobile emissions of particulates and other air pollutants, we should mandate that 100 percent of city school bus fleets, MTA buses, franchise bus fleets, medallion taxis and other city-owned vehicles operate on clean fuels. Then we should go after (private) fleet, freight and heavy duties vehicles that travel local NYC streets, and establish clean fuel stations accessible to public and private fleet vehicles and taxis.

I offer nothing new.

The three-year-old Strategic Clean Air Plan also proposed attracting AFVs manufacturers to the city. (Taxis get replaced about every two years, so why not build them here and create jobs?) It called for new emergency and heavy-duty vehicles to be AFVs, annual city reports on Federal Clean Air Act and the State Implementation Plan compliance and participation in the Federal Clean Cities program.

Inform and the Natural Resources Defense Council support the Strategic Clean Air Plan; the Queens Civic Congress platform included its elements.

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