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The Public Ought to Know: City must explore trash options

By Corey Bearak

When weekly recycling returned this past summer, I got excited. I wrote last summer how cost effective recycling is within New York City's reach. Weekly collection of recyclables offers a start towards greater waste reduction.



Yet, some programmatic efforts fall short despite good intentions. The city should think outside the box as it builds recycling and waste reduction programs to avert the costs of exporting residential trash to landfills outside New York.

Landfills in places like Virginia and Pennsylvania absorb some 70 percent of the city's residential and commercial waste, according to City Comptroller William Thompson.

Last month, the mayor announced a waste disposal plan that includes shipping garbage by barge from four marine transfer stations costing \$340 million to rebuild: one on Manhattan's upper east side; one on Queens' Flushing waterfront; and two existing Brooklyn sites. A rail transfer station would handle Staten Island trash. A private transfer station operated by Waste Management will ship Bronx trash by rail. An Essex County, New Jersey incinerator would also receive residential trash trucked directly from Manhattan.

The city plans to enter into 20-year service agreements for each of the four city-owned marine transfer stations with one or more private waste management companies, which would be expected to accept containerized trash, ship it by either rail or barge and be responsible for its disposal at a landfill or incinerator.

The city's proposed Solid Waste Management Plan, required under state

law, expects the shift to a waterborne network to transport its residential and commercial trash to annually reduce private trash truck trips by nearly 200,000; that means nearly three million less truck miles annually. Some of the city's least affluent communities currently endure private waste transfer stations which handle commercial waste collected by private carting companies. This plan must adequately address that condition.

In September, City Hall announced a long term plan to process recyclables the Sanitation Department collects through curbside recycling. Long overdue, this plan involves constructing a modern recycling facility to which the city will deliver all of the metal, glass and plastic, and a portion of the mixed paper the Sanitation Department collects over the next 20 years. This plan should enable the city to turn some trash in to cash, an environmentally sound resource recovery at its best.

A report by Comptroller Thompson issued the same day the mayor announced the Solid Waste Management Plan noted how "New York City's public and private sectors generate approximately 15 million tons of trash each year, with more than 10 million tons exported." The report also raised the risks of dependence on out of state landfills when the Pennsylvania sites expect to last only through 2007.

When we first discussed the a mandatory recycling program over 25 years ago, one concern of residential property owners concerned their ability to store separated trash and recyclables. This concern reared its head again with the city's announcement of plans to resume collection of tree leaves later this month. The plan also included Halloween pumpkins. The end product of leaf recycling generated a very popular free product many of us use in our gardens each spring.

Don't think I did not notice the lack of the program last Spring when I needed to buy soil and compost for the flowers Rachelle and I bought at the Queens County Farm Museum's greenhouse. In the past few years, all I've needed do was head over to a Shea Stadium parking lot or a site in east New York (depending on my schedule) to pick up free compost.

At the end of last month, the Sanitation Department mailed postcards and posted on its website plans to collect leaves and pumpkins later this month.

By that time, I already to my own dismay, disposed of several bags of

leaves. Residing in an attached home situated mid-block, I lack the easy access to my rear yard to store leaves. Commercial gardeners will also likely collect and bag leaves. When Bruno DeFranceschi, who heads my Bellerose civic emailed the website information that Sanitation will collect leaves and pumpkins in Queens and Staten Island on November 13 and 27 and in The Bronx and Brooklyn on November 20 and December 4, I shared my concern about the program's late start may mean leaves going to landfills instead of becoming compost. Bruno said he emailed the agency last month for late October and early November collection "to no avail." Next year, Sanitation should start leaf collection earlier and we also look forward to periodic collection of grass clippings and other yard waste as envisioned by the 1989 New York City Recycling Law.

Corey Bearak is an attorney and adviser on government, community and public affairs. He is also active in Queens civic and political circles. He can be reached via e-mail at Bearak@aol.com. Visit his web site at CoreyBearak.com.

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