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The Public Ought to Know: City Council must vote for five-boro waste plan

By Corey Bearak

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The Organization of Waterfront Neighborhoods visited the executive committee of the Queens Civic Congress last week to enlist support for the mayor's proposed solid waste management plan.

The organization's representatives from Brooklyn, Bronx and Queens talked about the need for fairness and equity in siting marine transfer stations to handle trash generated in each of the city's five boroughs. The City Planning Commission earlier this month approved a plan to site marine transfer stations at four sites including one on Manhattan's Upper East Side. Residents there oppose the site. How that matter gets resolved may affect a candidate for mayor in much the way the mayor's opponents use the Far West Side Stadium to question City Hall's priorities.

Communities impacted by waste transfer stations - mostly lower-income neighborhoods - successfully pressed the Bloomberg administration to shift gears from the Giuliani administration's emphasis on waste export via trucks. The shift to barges would significantly reduce harmful truck pollution. The plan next goes before the City Council. OWN asked the civic congress to embrace the plan. The congress, consistent with its platform, committed to contact Queens council members supporting a plan as long as each borough bears a burden.

Until 1987, commercial and city trash - mostly residential - got shipped to Fresh Kills on Staten Island by barge from marine transfer stations in each borough. That year the city raised the "tipping" fees for private trash carters to dump at Fresh Kills. The plan aimed to encourage carters to emphasize waste reduction and recycling by their customers - and thereby extend the useful life of the city's only remaining landfill. Others saw the city using the increase to simply raise some cash. The carting industry, then dominated by local mob interests, shifted gears entirely. They shifted from dumping their trash at Fresh Kills to exporting their trash via long-haul trailers.

The new system led to the opening of waste transfer stations - usually on open, inexpensive sites in some of the city's poorest communities. Carters would dump trash at these sites for compacting and loading onto larger trucks to haul trash to landfills upstate and in places such as Pennsylvania.

This caused neighborhoods - already with the city's highest asthma and children's asthma rates - to endure more particulate pollution that exacerbates this harmful disease. Private carter collection trucks still queue outside transfer stations in places like South Jamaica (five of Queens' 17 sites) waiting to dump trash that gets moved out by larger 18-wheeler long-haul trucks. Both operate on diesel fuels that emit dangerous particulates that foul our air and threaten our health. Certainly, public health and sound sanitation policy would include a shift to marine transfer stations when each barge handles the trash shipped in 15 tractor-trailers.

The tipping fee at these stations may also affect the willingness of the large multinational carters such as WasteManagement and Browning-Ferris that supplanted the mob-run private waste collection monopolies with their own. Local law does empower the city to direct carters to use certain waste transfer facilities and it should come into play when the marine transfer stations comes on line. In any event, the city's tipping fee should not be an inducement to the carting industry to prefer health and environmentally harmful waste export by truck.

The Manhattan site remains important because it would account for most of the annual vehicular mileage reduction achieved from trucking less trash, three million miles saved per year, about 60 percent. The other four boroughs combined would save two million tons annually. Manhattan generates 42 percent of the city's commercial waste, all of which gets

transported by truck to the other four boroughs and New Jersey.

Without enough marine transfer stations in Manhattan, export by diesel fuel-powered truck to other boroughs for transfer or through them will continue - as will the adverse environmental and health impacts caused.

The new marine transfer stations compare favorably to the old ones. The modern facilities will include space where up to 30 garbage collection trucks can queue inside, instead of impacting the surrounding neighborhood blocks.

The policy ought to also emphasize waste reduction and recycling, which tends to receive less true support than the needs merit. Stronger waste reduction and recycling helps to mitigate the adverse truck impacts while New Yorkers await implementation of the marine transfer plan.

Objections to the East 91st Street site could risk killing the entire plan; New Yorkers should embrace the five-borough plan and urge their council members to vote affirmatively when they get their chance, most likely next month.

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