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City's New Waste Plan and the Neighborhoods

by Tom Angotti

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Four years after the Bloomberg administration outlined a new strategy for disposing of the city's garbage, the City Council, on July 19, 2006, approved the [mayor's plan](#). The new Solid Waste Management Plan (referred to by officials as SWMP) looks ahead to the next 20 years, and promises big long-term savings and better air quality for the city. But perhaps its greatest impact will be in the waterfront neighborhoods of Brooklyn and the Bronx.

The new plan would funnel most waste to eight transfer stations located on the waterfront in each of the boroughs. Barges and trains would then take the waste out of the city, avoiding the use of thousands of tractor trailers and the significant traffic and environmental impacts they give birth to. Over time the plan would save the city money by streamlining operations, though in the short term costs will go up. The plan would also move responsibility for [recycling](#) into a separate office, sheltering it from the Department of Sanitation's institutional distaste for recycling that has in the past led to the abolition of the entire program. Recycling will now expand and greater emphasis will be placed on the education of residents and businesses.

The Role of Neighborhoods

Most news reports failed to recognize the Organization of Waterfront Neighborhoods (OWN) as one of the intellectual authors of the new strategy. This group, a coalition of 26 community organizations that got together over a decade ago to fight the concentration of private waste transfer stations in their neighborhoods, came up with the idea of retrofitting some of the city's existing marine transfer stations, combining both household and commercial waste in a single plan, and insuring that no one borough had to bear the burden for the rest of the city. OWN's members include neighborhoods in Brooklyn and the Bronx that take some 70 percent of all waste (excluding construction waste). OWN's [plan](#), prepared with the help of the Consumer's Union and released in 2000, has three major components:

1. retrofit the marine transfer stations,=
2. boost recycling
3. reduce waste.

In 2002, Mayor Michael Bloomberg, facing a rising budget for the Department of Sanitation and cries from impacted neighborhoods, announced a new city strategy that followed the main lines of the OWN plan. The OWN plan is the first city-wide plan generated by neighborhood groups.

Elizabeth Yeampierre, executive director of UPROSE ([United Puerto Ricans of Sunset Park](#)), a member of OWN, was elated at the City Council action. "We were delighted that the mayor pushed for this plan and the Speaker had the wisdom to work with him." Yeampierre, who also chairs the [New York City Environmental Justice Alliance](#), was quick to note that Brooklyn's Sunset Park "is one of the city's environmentally burdened communities" yet it "has accepted its responsibility" since one of the large marine transfer stations is located there. "We're still trying to get the capacity of this facility reduced," she said. When asked what she thought about the continuing opposition of Upper East Side (Manhattan) residents to a smaller facility in their neighborhood, Yeampierre replied that "environmental burdens have to be shared."

Waste Export vs. Sustainability

The concept of "sustainability" mentioned by Yeampierre deserves some careful consideration and could point the way towards greater progress on waste. Sustainability generally means planning to meet the needs of the present without compromising the needs of future generations. Up to now, solid waste policy has been driven by short-term pragmatic steps that failed to look at long-term consequences. For about a century, the Department of Sanitation's role has been literally to take out the trash. First it was stuffed into landfills and when landfill space ran out, it was exported. In 1987, the city increased the fees at its last remaining landfill, Fresh Kills in Staten Island, without planning for the rash of new privately-owned waste transfer stations that sprung up, principally in

low-income communities of color. Most of the city's waste wound up going through these neighborhoods.

The assault on these neighborhoods by trash dealers was combated by a nascent environmental justice movement, which claimed that these communities were getting a grossly disproportionate share of the waste. Many of these neighborhoods were already burdened with polluting facilities and had exceptionally high levels of asthma that could be related to diesel truck fumes, traffic, and poorly managed waste facilities. They pressured City Hall to adopt strict regulations governing private waste transfer stations, as required under Local Law 40. When local activists went into battle, they soon linked arms.

When Mayor Rudolph Giuliani closed the city's last landfill in 2001, the city's sanitation agency kept on doing what it had been doing in the past, taking out the trash. Once all of the city's waste was exported the Department of Sanitation budget grew rapidly, nearly doubling in amount.

The one part of OWN's agenda that advanced very little with the new solid waste management plan was waste reduction. While city government has taken some important steps to reduce its own waste, legislation will be required to tackle the enormous trash flow resulting from unnecessary product packaging, the outdated bottle return law, and the low cost to manufacturers for making rapidly obsolescent products that can't easily be recycled. Groups like [INFORM](#) and the NYC Waste Reduction [Coalition](#) have been in the forefront of proposing methods to reduce the total volume of waste. Looking forward, their efforts need to be linked with the efforts of the neighborhoods and government to deal with the more fundamental issues of sustainability. A lot more can be done to reduce the sheer volume of waste that's exported. New technology may allow for decentralized systems to compost organic waste from kitchens, including the restaurants that produce most of Manhattan's commercial waste, but it may take legislation and more innovation in government to make this happen.

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[Newly Approved Trash Plan Puts Emphasis on Recycling by Winnie Hu, 7/21/06 NY Times](#)

[City Council Backs Mayor's Trash Disposal Plan by Winnie Hu, 7/20/06 NY Times](#)

[New York City Environmental Justice Alliance](#)

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