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Odors From Plant Anger Many in Harlem

By RICHARD SEVERO

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The residents say the odor from the plant, which stretches from 137th Street to 145th Street along the Hudson River, is like that of rotten eggs. There is agreement that the odor is a telltale sign of hydrogen sulfide gas. But there is no agreement on its cause, and speculation ranges from a broken sewer line to the assertion that the plant is trying to handle more raw sewage than it was designed for. The presence of the gas could pose a health problem for some.

Residents acknowledge the problem is intermittent, but they are angry at what they say is the city's unresponsiveness to their complaints.

Peggy Shepard and Vernice Miller, the co-founders of West Harlem Environmental Action, said they have received complaints about the odor from as far south as 123d Street, as far north as 157th Street and as far east as Convent Avenue, about four blocks away.

As the plant, which is being built under city supervision, nears completion of its sewage treatment center, work is also progressing on a \$130 million, 28-acre park atop the plant. The park will include a restaurant, two swimming pools, a greenhouse, and a carousel.

The park's design received an award last year from the City Club, which described it as "strong, simple and serene." But Mrs. Shepard said the odor is so vexing that many Harlem residents may not allow their children to use the park.

Hector Aponte, assistant regional director of the state's Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, said recurrent reports of odors concern him, but he added, "We don't expect them to be there when the park is open." He said he has faith that the source of the problem will be found and corrected.

Originally, several sites south of Harlem were considered for the plant, on which construction was begun in January 1972. Mrs. Shepard said she believed Harlem was chosen because at the time its residents were not sophisticated about urban environmental issues.

The odor residents complain about -that of rotten eggs - is a sign of hydrogen sulfide gas, which is typically formed by bacterial action on sewage containing sulfur compounds.

The city concedes that the plant may emit an occasional odor that could be noticed on the West Side Highway. "But I am not aware of any odor back in the community," said Joe Miller, chief engineer for the city's Department of Environmental Protection. Different Expert Opinions

Mr. Miller's assessment represents a slight shift from the position taken by Harvey W. Schultz, Commissioner of the Department of Environmental Protection, who essentially said there was no real odor problem. In a July 1987 letter to David N. Dinkins, the Mayor-elect and Manhattan Borough President, Mr. Schultz wrote that "the amount of hydrogen sulfide gas produced at North River is truly negligible."

The letter was written after Mr. Dinkins, responding to complaints from Harlem residents, commissioned a research team under Dr. Barry Commoner, the environmental scientist, to study the North River plant's effect on the air quality.

Dr. Commoner, who is with the Center for the Biology of Natural Systems at Queens College, concluded in mid-1987 that, among other things, the plant occasionally emitted both hydrogen sulfide and sulfur dioxide in excess of New York State air quality standards.

In sufficient quantity, hydrogen sulfide is more than a foul odor; it deprives human cells of oxygen. Chuck Sutton, a Democratic leader in West Harlem, said this posed special problems for residents of his district who suffer from sickle-cell anemia, a condition in which cells suffer from insufficient oxygen. Commoner Report Assailed

Mr. Schultz in his letter said he found the Commoner report badly flawed. He said that the plant had emitted odors when it started operating in 1986, but that those problems had been cleared up by the summer of 1987.

The precise cause of the odor has not been determined but Mr. Miller now says he hopes the problem will vanish when the plant begins

secondary sewage treatment next year. The city, meanwhile, plans to mount fans just below the West Side Highway, which it hopes will blow unwanted fumes back into the plant, Mr. Miller said.

But fans alone may not do the job, according to the Interstate Sanitation Commission, a watchdog agency financed by New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. The commission has concluded that the plant is operating over capacity and could be in violation of its State Pollution Discharge Elimination System permit, which is issued by the Department of Environmental Conservation in Albany.

Alan I. Mytelka, director and chief engineer of the commission, said the plant was built to handle only 170 million gallons of raw sewage a day, but it already handles 180 million on an average day and sometimes has peak flows as high as 230 million gallons.

Those flows, he explained, occur after heavy rains when storm water is mixed with human waste in the sewers, which are not designed to separate the two. Dr. Mytelka said he did not know if such incidents of high flow have caused the odor, but he wanted the question investigated. Environmentalists suspect that the overloaded plant may sometimes inadequately treat its wastes and that some waste water may actually be discharged into the Hudson with virtually no treatment. Overload and Development

"The overload is mostly the result of all that development we've had on the West Side," said Sam Bishop, a consultant to the Coalition for a Liveable West Side, an environmental group. "The city pushed development and never wanted to spend anything on infrastructure."

City officials deny that the plant is handling more waste than it should, even on an occasional basis, and they say it can actually handle far more than 170 million gallons a day.

Mr. Miller said the plant can really handle 186 million gallons a day. He explained that it was originally designed to handle 220 million gallons, but was ordered scaled back by the state and Federal Governments, which are paying most of the construction costs. But, he said, the city knew it would need additional capacity and some elements of the original design were left in place so the plant could handle more than its official rating.

The plant, which is expected to be completed next year, subjects sewage to what the city calls the advanced preliminary process. This removes about 15 percent of the material that uses oxygen, which is commonly called biochemical oxygen demand, in the sewage and around a third of the suspended solids. The plant is expected to begin secondary treatment next year, which means removal of 85 percent of both biochemical oxygen demand and suspended solids.

Since it started operation, the plant has been credited with making the Hudson a cleaner river. But Vernice Miller, of West Harlem Environmental Action, is not impressed. "It isn't cleaner in Harlem," she said.