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NEIGHBORHOOD REPORT: WEST HARLEM; Residents Say Return Of Trash Station Reeks of Racism

By DENNY LEE

The stench of garbage may soon return to West Harlem, but residents are trying to keep it at bay.

The foul odor dissipated two years ago when the Fresh Kills landfill closed, and along with it, a large pier at West 135th Street where mountains of trash once stewed before being shipped to Staten Island.

Now the Bloomberg administration is preparing to reopen the pier, known as a marine transfer station, as part of a new waste management plan to haul away the city's trash by barges, rather than by 18-wheel trailers, as is the current practice.

The plan involves a total of nine transfer stations in the five boroughs, including three in Manhattan. But residents in West Harlem say their community has suffered an unfair share of the city's pollution, and want to keep the station mothballed.

"The reopening of the marine transfer station represents another assault on this community," said Cecil D. Corbin-Mark, the program director for West Harlem Environmental Action, an advocacy group. "We have two very large sewage treatment plants. We have six out of the eight diesel bus depots in Manhattan. And we've got three Department of Sanitation truck facilities."

Some residents of the historically black neighborhood sees the city's recent decision as a symptom of what they call "environmental racism."

"The city wouldn't dare put something like this in Chelsea," said Regina McRae, who runs a bakery out of her apartment at West 138th Street, overlooking the transfer pier, and who fears that her asthma will be aggravated by reopening it. "They still think of this as a drug-infested area."

City sanitation officials insisted that the plan was based solely on logistics and costs, not on any political calculus.

"Those residents are not being singled out," said Kathy Dawkins, a sanitation spokeswoman. "That marine transfer station was used before, and under this new plan, is being reactivated."

The 135th Street station would handle the same amount of garbage as before, about 1,000 tons a day, and would serve the same Upper Manhattan neighborhoods, from Harlem to Inwood. (The rest of Manhattan's trash would be funneled to the borough's two other transfer stations, at West 59th Street and East 91st Street.)

The plan now faces a lengthy environmental review, and residents are bracing for an uphill fight. "Other parts of the borough," Mr. Corbin-Mark said, "need to shoulder their weight." DENNY LEE