

October 7, 2004

City Trash Plan Forgoes Trucks, Favoring Barges

By IAN URBINA

Three years after the closing of the mammoth Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island, the Bloomberg administration has drawn up a 20-year plan to deal with the city's residential waste by shipping the bulk of it elsewhere by barge, officials who have been briefed on the plan said yesterday.

The city has struggled for years with how to handle the 11,000 tons of waste per day that used to go to Fresh Kills, and since it was closed the city has been relying on trucks to cart most of its garbage out of state, a costly solution that generates pollution and traffic congestion. In an announcement planned for today, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg was expected to address those concerns by proposing renovation of four waste transfer stations along the city's waterfront: two in Brooklyn, one in Queens and one on the Upper East Side of Manhattan.

The plan is the culmination of a wider strategy that includes committing the city to recycling more of its garbage and shipping its commercial refuse away through a pier on the West Side of Manhattan - proposals announced over the last two weeks.

The city did not release any estimates of what the plan would cost or when it would take effect.

One goal appears to be to keep one borough's garbage from becoming another's burden, as is the case now, when garbage trucks rumble throughout the city carting trash mainly to points west of New York. While Manhattan, Queens and Brooklyn would have marine transfer stations, where trash can be dumped onto barges, Staten Island and the Bronx would rely on trains to cart trash away.

In recent years, the cost of handling waste has skyrocketed, as the city has depended on private transfer stations and private out-of-state haulers. By reopening its own transfer stations, the city hopes to reduce its dependence on private companies and lower its transport costs. With the marine transfer stations, the city also aims to gain more control over who carries the garbage away and where it is taken.

The plan, whose details have not been released publicly, will likely please residents of the neighborhoods that would have reduced garbage truck traffic, as well as those of areas like Harlem that had been considered potential sites for transfer stations. But the mayor's proposal will likely trigger a fight on the City Council, particularly over the reopening of the waste transfer station on East 91st Street in Manhattan, which lies in the district represented by the Council's speaker, Gifford Miller.

"I'm glad that they listened to the concerns that I raised about the West Harlem site, but they didn't listen when it came to the 91st Street station, which makes no sense at all," said Mr. Miller, who is likely to run for mayor in 2005. "Both of these are densely residential areas, and if it's a bad idea to open a station in one place, then it's also a bad idea to open it in the other."

The plan is subject to the Council's approval.

Under the plan, the city would avoid reopening the marine transfer station in the Bronx by signing a long-term contract with Waste Management, a major trash-hauling company that runs a station on the Harlem River, in the Mott Haven neighborhood, where the trash is shipped by rail. And while much of Manhattan's trash would leave the city by barge once the 91st Street station was rebuilt, some would be trucked directly from the curbside to a trash-to-energy plant near Newark under a long-term contract with an incineration company there.

Last week, the city announced its plan for handling commercial waste, which would involve reopening the marine transfer station on West 59th Street in Manhattan. The city also intends to open the Gansevoort station in Greenwich Village, on the Hudson River near 12th Street, which would be used exclusively to handle recyclable materials from Manhattan.

The trash problem has been a particularly vexing one for Mayor Bloomberg, who announced in July 2002 his intention to reopen eight marine transfer stations, only to backpedal after being faced with staunch community opposition and realizing that the transfer stations could not simply be reopened but would need to be demolished, expanded and rebuilt at a much higher cost.

The administration will likely set a goal of recycling 25 percent of its waste in the next several years, officials said. It will try to achieve this goal in part by building an educational center attached to the Gansevoort station, where the public could watch how recycling works.

Upon learning of the plan, many neighborhood and environmental groups expressed praise for the city's approach.

"This plan is great news for Harlem," said Peggy M. Shepard, executive director of West Harlem Environmental Action. "Anything that avoids more traffic and pollution coming through our neighborhood is a good thing."

Mark A. Izeman, a senior lawyer with the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental advocacy group said, "A positive part of the plan, as we understand it now, is an increased use of barge and rail to reduce truck traffic through our neighborhoods."

Others were less pleased.

"We think it's a terrible idea to open one of these stations in any residential district," said Richard G. Leland, a lawyer for the Gracie Point Community Council, a community group on the Upper East Side. "The mayor has made a determination to have a solid waste plan that sends hundreds of trucks that will endanger the health of children, elders and park users."

Some city officials, particularly the city comptroller, William C. Thompson Jr., expressed concerns about longer-term problems the city faces in handling its garbage.

"After much coaxing, the City finally realized that it must focus on waste reduction and recycling," Mr. Thompson said. "Now, the City must come to terms with the fact that there will be nowhere to ship our garbage unless we address this problem proactively."

In a report to be released today, the comptroller predicted that the city would run into problems in the next several years as landfill space ran out and the cost of handling waste continued to soar. The report said the city's waste-disposal costs jumped to \$75 per ton in 2002 from \$54 per ton in 1997. The report also projected that Pennsylvania, one of the primary importers of New York City's waste, would nearly

run out of landfill space by 2007.

To address these concerns, the city will probably also begin exploring ways to increase recycling and will look to alternative technologies for diverting waste from landfills and incineration, experts in the field say. These technologies include gasification, which is a type of high-temperature incineration that releases almost no pollution. The city will also likely investigate an accelerated type of composting that can be done on a larger scale.

Some experts view the plan with a touch of skepticism. "Every other plan for the last 25 years has itself ended up in the trash," said Steven M. Polan, who served as the City's sanitation commissioner from 1990 to 1992. When the last plan was released in 1992, the city committed itself to building an incinerator at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and in 1999 Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani announced a plan to ship waste to a rail transfer operation in Linden, N.J. None of it happened, Mr. Polan said.

"It's one thing to design a plan," he said. "It's another matter to actually implement it."