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ROTTEN GARBAGE

City needs help in getting rid of food waste

BY RICHARD LIPSKY

Two years ago Mayor Michael Bloomberg told his planners to come up with a way to reduce the amount of garbage trucked through our city streets to out-of-state landfills. He said at the time that 500,000 truck trips a year was "unacceptable," because they entailed increased diesel emissions that contributed to serious incidences of asthma in many low-income neighborhoods.

Recently, the mayor unveiled his latest plan and an initial look at the outline is not very encouraging. The City Council will begin to weigh in on it tomorrow. The central tenet of the mayor's initiative is the necessity of reducing the amount of trash produced by the city's residents and businesses.

The linchpin of the plan is the projected 10-year goal of a 70-percent recycling rate for commercial and residential waste. But there is nothing in the city's proposal that can be even remotely regarded as a way to achieve such a breath-taking level of recycling.

The garbage plan heralds the signing of a long-term contract with one of the country's most efficient and successful recycling companies. Unarguably, this is a good move, but it ignores the fact that higher recycling levels do not inevitably flow from a greater efficiency in the process-

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ing and marketing of the recyclables themselves.

Under the city's current curbside collection system, recycling levels are at the mercy of a command bureaucracy whose central mission for its entire history has been the disposal of municipal garbage in one landfill or another. Even if the Department of Sanitation was less hidebound and more innovative, we would still be facing the reality that most

New Yorkers simply don't have any great incentive to recycle more than they do now. What is the plan's answer to this obvious obstacle? The usual fallback of the clueless bureaucrat: more education.

The city's garbage disposal initiative has made a step in the right direction by acknowledging that we need to regard the disposal of residential and commercial waste as part of a single system. This awareness, however, does not translate into an innovative garbage reduction plan in either sector. The Bloomberg administration's proposal doesn't suggest any initiative to increase waste reduction and recycling in the commercial sphere.

So, with no concrete plan for waste reduction, we are left with a policy that will continue to rely on the kind of exporting and landfilling that, because of a diminished willingness on the part of neighboring states and a decreasing landfill capacity, will only become more and more financially prohibitive every year.

This is precisely why the city needs to expand the use of food waste disposers. It is estimated

that approximately 20 percent of all residential garbage is food waste. On the commercial side, the use of these disposers could eliminate about 99 percent of all the waste generated at supermarkets, restaurants, greengrocers, fish stores and bodegas. Once organic food waste is ground into an effluent and disposed of through the city's waste-water treatment infrastructure, almost all of the remaining garbage is recyclable.

Similar success can be achieved residentially. To reduce rat and roach infestation the city has introduced food-waste grinders into a few housing projects on the Lower East Side and in Bushwick. Meanwhile, thousands of waste-reducing devices are being installed in apartment kitchen sinks throughout the city.

Reducing residential food waste would have dramatic results, but the real payoff would come from the fact that, just as in the private sector, once you re-

move organic contaminants you have greatly enhanced the ability to transform garbage-transfer stations into source-separation recycling facilities. The city must find new methods to overcome the inherent limitations of a curbside collection program. This kind of innovation would help get the job done:

Unfortunately, city bureaucrats are opposed to the commercial installation of food waste disposers. They argue, without much persuadable evidence, that such a program would cost billions of dollars to retrofit waste-water treatment facilities. What these officials are missing, however, is that such a policy would be the first step toward eliminating the city's ever more expensive dependency on exporting our garbage.

Let's put the bureaucrats to the test by launching a pilot program for garbage disposers in the commercial sector. We are confident that the results will confound the doomsayers.

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