

## Let stores start using disposals

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**T**he thousands of pounds of food that markets and restaurants had to discard because of the blackout only underlines a problem these businesses routinely have with spoiled goods. It's a hardship that could be overcome if the city changed its law on food disposal.

The city prohibits markets and restaurants from storing garbage in outdoor dumpsters on the grounds they are a magnet for rats, mice and other vermin.

This is correct. But it makes no sense to force markets and restaurants to store this same garbage indoors where food is prepared for sale or consumption.

The city policy, known as Operation Dumpster, is designed to correct one public health problem — but creates another that is even worse.

There is an obvious, sensible solution: The city should permit those of us in the food industry to install and use garbage disposals. The city has already moved to permit these devices — which have been in use in other parts of the nation for decades — in private homes. Now it's time to put them into commercial use.

Not only would disposals be a blessing during a crisis like the blackout, they would go a long way toward reducing the city's rat infestation, which is costing millions to fight.

Here's an even bigger saving: Ever since the closing of the Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island, the city has been spending hundreds of millions to export its garbage to other states. The more food we divert from the garbage stream, the less we have to ship elsewhere.

It's a matter of planning for the future, too. There may come a day when other states refuse to accept any more New York garbage. The city must find ways now to reduce its waste stream.

The use of disposals would help a beleaguered industry. Food stores and restaurants have already been rocked by the post-9/11 recession, real estate tax increases, a city ticket blitz and now the blackout. What's more, these businesses face a tripling of their carting rates next month once a city rate hike for commercial waste haulers goes into effect.

Permitting the use of disposals would allow the stores and restaurants to reduce their garbage, minimize the impact of the rate hike and address neighborhood sanitary concerns.

There is legislation before the City Council to legalize garbage disposals. The bill is opposed by the Department of Environmental Protection, which says it would cost too much to adapt wastewater treatment plants to handle the additional food waste. But this objection ignores the department's own 1995 pilot study, which found that the addition of tens of thousands of new disposals would have a negligible impact on wastewater processing.

With the rat population burgeoning and the cost of carting garbage escalating, the use of disposals would be a vital tool in developing a fiscally sound, environmentally beneficial solid waste plan. Whatever additional costs this may create are more than made up for by healthier neighborhoods and the reduced cost of exporting the city's garbage.

It is a workable program that the mayor should support.

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