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Recycling Plan Centers on Organic Waste

By IAN URBINA

As the city prepares to unveil its 20-year plan this week for getting rid of its trash, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg will also have to explain how to deal with a different challenge: actually reducing the amount of garbage New York produces and sends to landfills.

Waste management experts say that by changing the way New Yorkers think about their waste, the city can exploit some innovative measures to reduce sanitation costs. Options include encouraging residents to increase the composting of food waste and yard material, expanding recycling programs and encouraging the recycling of computers and cellphones.

But one of the most contentious issues will be whether to expand the use of garbage disposal units, which grind down food waste so that it can then flow into the city's sewage system rather than be thrown away. In recent years, more New Yorkers have been using the units as laws regulating their use have been relaxed. The question now is whether to let restaurants and grocers use them, too.

"The Bloomberg administration is rightly seeking to streamline the movement of trash within the city," said Mark A. Izeman, a senior lawyer with the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental advocacy group. "But unless it takes additional concrete steps to shrink our monumental trash loads, the city will continue to be at the mercy of escalating export costs."

In the last three years, the cost of hauling and burying the city's trash has risen about 46 percent, and the operating budget for the Department of Sanitation has increased by about \$288 million over the last six fiscal years, to more than \$1 billion.

The mayor's 20-year plan for recycling plastic, glass and metal seeks to reduce the city's waste problems by ensuring that over the next several years about 20 percent of residential trash will not end up in landfills.

The city may consider imposing rules on electronics makers to encourage recycling on that front. While computers, cellphones and other types of electronic equipment do not currently account for a large part of the city's trash, they do represent the fastest-growing portion. Electronic products are built with toxic chemicals that can be hazardous when they are released into the environment after being incinerated or dumped into a landfill. The city could, for instance, require computer makers to accept the return of their products for recycling.

By far the most challenging trash to handle is organic material like food, leaves, and yard clippings, because of the smell created by these

materials when they rot and the vermin that are attracted as a result. But this rotting is also a potential asset if the city considers expanding its efforts in large-scale composting. Not only does such composting result in a material that can be used for fertilizer, but it also releases gases that can be captured for energy.

Environmentalists argue that because composting lowers the amount of trash going to landfills, it decreases the pollution caused by trash trucks and can save the city money. Composting also captures the gases released during decomposition, some of which have been tied to global warming, rather than allowing for their uncontrolled release into the environment from landfills.

Starting in 1989, the city has run various waste reduction programs, including a food waste composting operation at Rikers Island and leaf collection in 35 of the city's 59 sanitation districts, saving an estimated

The city hopes to save landfill space by allowing more garbage disposals.

47,000 tons of organic materials from being carted to landfills each year. The Bloomberg administration ended these programs in 2002, but the City Council reinstated them in June 2003.

"This on-again-off-again relationship with composting and other programs is a huge problem because the public has no idea what rules are in effect at any given moment," said Councilman Michael E. McMahon, a Staten Island Democrat and chairman of the Council's waste management committee.

The city is doing two leaf collections per year when it needs to do seven or eight to capture the maximum amount of fallen leaves, he said. The city also canceled the "self help" centers where residents could bring their construction and demolition debris for recycling, and the result, he said, has been an increase in illegal dumping.

But the most contentious approach for lowering the amount of food waste hauled to landfills would be for the city to expand the use of garbage disposal units.

Until recently, garbage disposers were banned in New York City in areas served by combined sewer systems. The intent of the ban was to limit the direct discharge of raw organic wastes into surrounding water-

ways during wet weather and to prevent possible clogging of the city's sewer system.

But after studying the matter, the City Council concluded that the disposal units would have little adverse effect on the city's pipes, and they reauthorized their residential use in 1997. The Council is considering legislation that would make the disposers mandatory in all new apartments and would legalize their use in restaurants and grocery stores.

"It defies reason that the city is not pressing ahead with installation of these machines," said Richard Lipsky, a lobbyist for the Neighborhood Retail Alliance, a coalition of city food retailers, who is working to get disposers legalized in restaurants and grocery stores. The disposers, which are easily installed, would reduce the city's reliance on trucks and landfills, and, by removing organic materials, greatly increase the recycling activity on both the commercial and residential fronts, Mr. Lipsky said. By lowering the amount of rotting trash that goes to Dumpsters, the disposers could lower the city's rat population, he said.

"All of these benefits have already been shown in certain low-income neighborhoods where rat problems and asthma from truck traffic tends to be the worst," said Mr. Lipsky, pointing at the results of a pilot program began in 2002 as a joint effort by the Department of Health and the New York City Housing Authority to install garbage disposers in several hundred apartments on the Lower East Side of Manhattan and Bushwick in Brooklyn.

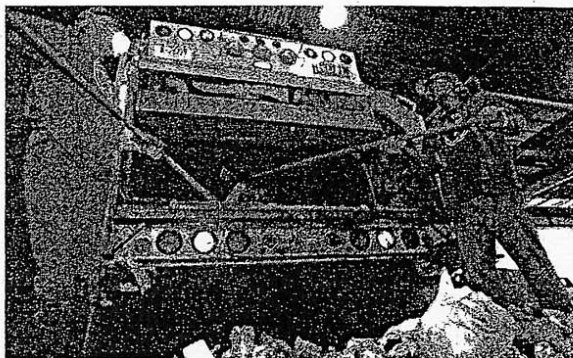
The cost of ensuring that the city's sewer lines can handle the added load would also be offset by the reduced amount of trash that the city would have to pay to bury at landfills, he said.

Some environmentalists disagree. Reed W. Super, a lawyer with Riverkeeper, an environmental advocacy group, said that the city's overloaded sewer system already caused an estimated 27 billion gallons of untreated sewage to flow into the waters surrounding the city each year. "Why would you possibly want to add more burden to an already overburdened system?" Mr. Super said.

"Just last month, the clog problem brought the city's entire transportation system to a grinding halt," he added. Mr. Super explained that the subway failures during the last month's rainstorms were partly caused by street drains that became overloaded, leaving subway sump pumps with no place to dump the underground water collecting on the subway tracks.

"Increasing the use of disposers makes no sense at all," said Christopher O. Ward, commissioner of the Department of Environmental Protection, which controls the city's sewer system, explaining that there is no evidence that the disposers actually reduce the amount of trash in the waste stream. "I doubt that the evidence would outweigh the well-documented detriment to the aquatic life caused by increased nitrogen levels. I also doubt they would outweigh the cost for maintenance required to the combined sewer systems to handle this waste."

If all 19,000 restaurants in the city had disposers, Mr. Ward said, it would add roughly 6,000 pounds per day of nitrogen into the sewer flow and would require an upgrade to the city's sewer system that would cost \$4 billion to \$10 billion.



Robert Stolarik for The New York Times

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