

Food Waste, Rats and Garbage Disposal

In the wake of 9/11 New York City was confronted with an unprecedented political crisis. This was the kind of crisis, one that combined economic, spiritual and security issues, that would have challenged even the most seasoned chief executive. Yet Mayor Bloomberg, coming into office without any political experience whatsoever, has tackled the crisis head on, and has made the tough command decisions without regard to their political consequences. This same kind of approach will be needed if the city is going to be able to solve its intertwined garbage disposal and public health problems.

As published reports have demonstrated with a dramatic clarity, the proliferation of rats and mice in the city neighborhoods has created a public health crisis. The rat epidemic however, is only a symptom of the larger garbage crisis that New York faces over the coming years. The crisis, as challenging as it is, also offers an opportunity to decision-makers. If the smart, courageous decisions are made today New York will be able to avoid the potential fiscal and public health nightmare that lies immediately over the horizon.

One of these decisions would be the immediate embrace of the use of food waste disposers. In response to sanitation concerns the city has implemented Operation Dumpster, a program that prohibits stores from storing any garbage in outside dumpsters. It seems that this outdoor storage creates noxious odors and acts as a magnet for vermin. This is absolutely correct. What is inexplicable is how, given this observation it makes any sense to insist that supermarkets and restaurants store this same garbage where food is being prepared for consumption and sale. Operation Dumpster, designed to correct one public health problem, creates one that is even worse.

The use of food waste disposals is not only a sanitary benefit in the face of a rat epidemic. The city is spending hundreds of millions of dollars to export its garbage and the price is escalating with no limit in site. The simple fact is that the more we can divert through the waste treatment infrastructure the less we have to export. We control our own destiny and don't have to depend on jurisdictions that could, if federal legislation passes, simply refuse to accept anymore New York garbage in their landfills.

The use of disposals would also help beleaguered food stores and restaurants. Already rocked by a post 9/11 recession, real estate tax increases and a wave of enforcement violations, these businesses are now facing a potential tripling of their garbage disposal rates in September once the city rate hike goes into effect for commercial waste haulers. This increase will have a particularly harsh impact on food stores that generate the heavier wet waste that costs more to dump. Permitting the use of disposals would allow the stores to reduce the amount of garbage they dispose and enable them to mitigate rate hikes as well as address neighborhood sanitary concerns.

In spite of all these benefits the Bloomberg administration has not yet thrown its full support behind Intro 407, the legislation that has been introduced to legalize food waste disposals. Officials at the Department of Environmental Protection feel that it would cost too much to adopt the waste treatment facilities to additional food waste. This objection comes in spite of the fact that the Department's own 1995 pilot study argues that the proliferation of tens of thousands of new disposals would have a negligible impact on waste water processing.

With the rat population burgeoning and the cost of garbage disposal escalating, the use of food waste disposers can be a vital tool in the development of a fiscally sound

and environmentally beneficial solid waste plan. Whatever additional costs it may create are more than made up for by decreased garbage export costs and healthier neighborhoods. It is a workable program that the mayor should eagerly support and immediately implement.