

Neighborhood Retail Alliance

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Garbage In, Garbage Out

As the city administration slowly reveals its plans for the disposal of commercial garbage it becomes quickly apparent that, in spite of the mayor's protestations to the contrary, the plain motto is an old familiar song: "Keep on Truckin'"

Over a year ago, on the heels of the collapse of the administration's first effort at a comprehensive solid waste management plan, the mayor made it clear, for environmental and public health reasons, that it was simply unacceptable to permit 500,000 yearly garbage truck trips through the city streets, on the way to transfer stations and out-of-state landfills.

As a response to these issues it appears that the city believes that opening a commercial transfer station at 59th Street in Manhattan will, through localizing garbage removal, eliminate the problem of pollution and noise caused by the over-reliance on a truck-based garbage disposal system. The plan will fall far short of this goal for a number of important reasons.

In the first place, it is by no means simple to force haulers to alter their business relationships for the convenience of the city. A number of carters have interests in their own transfer stations and will be resistant to jeopardizing their profit margins. If the city decides to mandate the use of 59th street either through flow control or as a franchise plan that essentially creates a municipally-sponsored monopoly, than we can envision years of litigation whose outcome is far from certain.

The city's plan is further flawed because it fails to keep in mind the principle of Occam's Razor, i.e. that the best solution to a problem is almost always the simplest. In the case of garbage disposal and truck traffic, simplicity lies in the reduction of the waste that needs to be disposed of in the first place. The simplest solution for reducing commercial waste is legalizing the use of food waste disposers.

If this low-impact technology was legalized it is quite possible to eliminate over 75% of 14,000 daily tons of commercial garbage that is currently being trucked through city streets. Once the organic contaminants are separated out, a vast proportion of the remaining trash will be easily recyclable. This is not simply a theory. My own company, working with the city's independent supermarkets, is doing just that through a source separation program. The use of disposers would facilitate the recycling effort and help us expand the program to other city food stores.

The use of disposers would also address another public health issue: the growing rat epidemic. Currently the city, under a policy called Operation Dumpster, prohibits the outdoor storage of garbage on the grounds that it is a magnet for vermin.

That is correct. But it certainly makes no sense to force stores and restaurants to take the same garbage back into the areas where food is stored and prepared. The use of disposers, by reducing the food supply, would be a major benefit for the city's effort to reduce the population of disease-carrying rodents and insects.

While the benefits of disposers seem obvious the administration adamantly opposes their legalization. Its rationale is that legalization will overwhelm the waste water treatment infrastructure, costing the city tax payers billions of dollars in retrofitting expense. It is the city's argument, however, that doesn't hold water.

In the 1990s city bureaucrats used the same alarmist talk to oppose efforts to legalize the residential use of disposers. In response, a pilot program was introduced and the result simply mocked the bureaucratic doom and gloomers. With the results of the pilot as a guide, the City Council passed a law legalizing the use of residential garbage disposers.

Our current garbage disposal crisis demands bold and innovative approaches. Intro 220, a bill that would legalize commercial food waste disposers, has been introduced at the City Council but remains stalled as a result of the administration's cost projects. If the political will doesn't exist to simply pass the bill as is, then it would make unassailable sense to use the city's experience with residential disposers as a guide to action.

Lets do a pilot program for commercial food waste disposers. The potential benefits are so significant that we can't allow the alarmists to cause legislative gridlock while the city's streets and neighborhoods continue to be polluted by hundreds of thousands of noisome garbage trucks every year.