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Residents Say Sewage Is Not the Only Smell

By NICK RAVO

Over the last few years, residents in West Harlem and Washington Heights have grown uncomfortably accustomed to airborne annoyances.

Ever since the North River Sewage Treatment Plant opened on the Hudson River in Manhattan five years ago, foul-smelling fumes from the plant have permeated the area. Now, residents say, smoke that smells like burning rubber rises from a chimney at an 11-year-old crematorium at the Trinity Church cemetery at 153d Street and Riverside Drive, the uptown counterpart of the church's more famous graveyard on Broadway at Wall Street. The residents say the smoke sometimes burns their eyes or causes coughing. As a result, they have vowed to shut the crematorium down.

"We are going to picket," said Shirley Clarke, who says she can see and sometimes smell the crematorium's fumes from her apartment a block away. "We want to hold up the hearses, and have signs saying, 'We can smell your mother burning!'"

Last week, about 80 residents, many of them affiliated with the North River Community Environmental Review Board, a citizens advisory group, met with state and city environmental officials about the crematorium, which is the only one in Manhattan and one of only four in New York City.

While state officials expressed some concern about potential pollution from the crematorium, they assured residents that there were no health risks.

The complaints have flummoxed the crematorium's operators, who say their chimney has air scrubbers and other stench-stopping devices.

"It's all psychological," Al Spagnoli, the crematorium supervisor, said of the complaints. He said the chimney's only emission has been water vapor or steam, which dissipates in seconds.

State officials said they are nonetheless concerned. While they have not actually seen or smelled noxious emissions at the crematorium, they say they have viewed a videotape supplied by a protester purporting to show black smoke coming from the chimney. Four Bodies a Day

The officials also say that they have inspected the crematorium many times and have twice found at least one of the building's four burners operating below 1,400 degrees Farenheit, in violation of state law. When a body is burned below 1,400 degrees, the officials said, it increases the likelihood of smoke. The crematorium burns about four bodies a day, its operators say.

The officials have given the crematorium until October to bring all of its burners up to standard or face losing its operating license.

"Anytime you have an incinerator, whether its garbage, coal or dead bodies, you're going to have some problems," said Bill Hewitt, spokesman for the state Department of Environmental Conservation. "I think the main concerns are for any kind of infectious organisms."

Residents from 125th Street up to 155th Street are especially sensitive to such issues because of design flaws in the sewage treatment plant. The plant, which stretches from 137th Street to 145th Street along the Hudson River, has for years been intermittently releasing invisible clouds of gas that smell like rotten eggs. The odor is generally attributed to bacterial action creating hydrogen sulfide gas stemming from either a broken line or the system's handling too much waste.

Crematoriums have been cited in studies as a potential source of pollution because of the mercury in amalgam used in some dental fillings, the plutonium used in some pacemakers and toxic gasses from burning coffins.

Industry officials, however, contend that the amount of mercury released by crematoriums is minute, that Federal regulations require that any pacemaker using plutonium be removed before cremation, and that most bodies are burned in cardboard boxes.

The Federal Environmental Protection Agency does not list crematoriums as a source of toxic pollutants. And Robert H. Elburn, head of the air-compliance group for the state Department of Environmental Conservation, said a crematorium is not a health threat. "It's not hazardous to the health any more than if you were right next to a barbecue," he said.