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NEIGHBORHOOD REPORT: WEST HARLEM; Settlement Gives Group Means of Compiling Health Data

By EMILY M. BERNSTEIN

The \$1.1 million settlement the city has agreed to pay to a neighborhood group in a lawsuit over sewage odors from the North River Treatment Plant will be used to document health problems in West Harlem, the group's founders say.

"Now we will have the health data to back up what we know to be true," said Vernice Miller, a co-founder of West Harlem Environmental Action. "People are not making up that they are sick. This community has been besieged by something that is not natural."

The city agreed to the payment on Mayor Dinkins's last day in office to settle a suit over odors emanating from the sewage treatment plant, which had provoked complaints for seven years.

Ms. Miller and Peggy Shepard, the other founder of the organization, say the sewage treatment plant, which stretches from 137th to 144th Street on the Hudson River, is only the latest source of environmental problems in West Harlem. Others include two bus depots and a point where trucks drop off garbage onto barges. The people living near such places are at risk for asthma and other diseases, Ms. Miller and Ms. Shepard say.

Several studies have shown that members of minorities living in the inner city have a much higher incidence of asthma and other illnesses related to the environment. An estimated 12 percent of Central Harlem residents have asthma, more than three times the national average.

But because West Harlem is divided among three city health districts, there are no studies that address it specifically.

The money, which should be available by the end of February, must be spent within five years. Any spending plan must be approved by the courts.

Ms. Shepard and Ms. Miller are also members of an advisory group to the West Harlem Environmental Benefits Fund, a \$1.1 million fund under the auspices of the city's Department of Environmental Protection, and they hope to dovetail the efforts of both groups.

"You walk around thinking, 'If we had the resources . . .'" said Ms. Miller. "It hasn't really sunk in that we do have the resources." E.M.B.