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NEIGHBORHOOD REPORT: HARLEM; Will a Harlem Plant Become a Son of Fresh Kills?

By NINA SIEGAL

What does the closing of the Fresh Kills landfill have in common with a plan to submerge part of the West Side Highway? To some Harlem residents they both harbor the same danger: more garbage in their part of town.

With the landfill set to close in 2002, the state has ruled that the city must upgrade one waste-disposal center in each borough to absorb Fresh Kills garbage. When the Department of Sanitation issued the first draft of a solid-waste management plan this year, it proposed upgrading only one of the three disposal centers in Manhattan: the one in Harlem, on the Hudson River at 135th Street. The plan angered neighborhood groups, who cried environmental racism.

Since then the city has asked for proposals to upgrade, or retrofit, all of the city's eight disposal centers, which are known as marine transfer stations. But some Harlem residents suspect that their station will still receive the brunt of the garbage leaving Manhattan, said Cecil Corbin-Mark, program director of West Harlem Environmental Action.

In the meantime, the State Department of Transportation and New York State Urban Development Corporation met on Wednesday to discuss the possible submergence of the Miller Highway, the segment of the West Side Highway from 59th to 72d Streets, to create room for a park. One entrance to that highway, at 59th Street, abuts another marine transfer station.

Leslie Lowe, executive director of the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance, which represents 16 neighborhood groups, said highway construction might begin just when Fresh Kills was closed and the city needed increased access to the station. "If they tear up the road and you can't get to the transfer station at the critical moment, I'm afraid they're going to say, 'Oh, we can just use the one up in Harlem,'" she said. "Harlem is being set up."

In sum, said Councilman Bill Perkins, who represents Harlem: "All of these scenarios point to the 135th Street transfer station. And although they don't seem concretized yet, there's a lot of fear. It appears Harlem is about ready to go to war about all this garbage."

Martha Hirst, the city's deputy commissioner for solid waste, said no plans were focused on Harlem. "We have invited people to give us ideas," she said, adding that the upgrade proposals, "for any marine transfer station," were due on Friday.

Steve Simon, chief of staff for Councilman Stanley Michels, who recently held a hearing on the stations, said the fears about dumping were unfounded. "I think people read into the original document that if the 135th Street station was retrofitted the other stations would be closed," he said. "That is not the plan."

Still, many residents bitterly remember losing the fight to keep a sewage treatment plant out of their neighborhood a decade ago. L. Ann Rucker, chief administrative officer of the North River Community Environmental Review Board, a nonprofit organization, has lived on Riverside Drive near 140th Street since the 1960's.

"It used to be a beautiful, cool, breezy drive," she said. "But it's been transformed into a stinking, sewage-smelling, garbage-smelling place filled with rats. Now they want to cap it off by forcing more garbage on us." NINA SIEGAL

Correction: July 25, 1999, Sunday An article in the Neighborhood Report pages on July 4 about some Harlem residents' concern that the closing of the Fresh Kills landfill will mean greater use of a marine transfer station on West 135th Street misstated New York State's position on waste disposal. The state has not ruled that the city must upgrade one disposal center in each borough to handle waste after the closing of Fresh Kills.

The article also misstated the Sanitation Department's position on the West 135th Street site. The department examined the feasibility of upgrading that station, but did not propose it. And because of an editing error, the article misstated the deadline for proposals to upgrade marine transfer stations. It was July 9, not July 2.