



FEBRUARY 20, 2015

## The Bronx is Breathing

by Sarah Crean

*This story was updated on February 25th to include more information on what types of waste move through the South Bronx. It was also updated on March 2nd to more accurately explain the potential*

*impact of waste cap legislation currently under review by the City Council.*

\*\*\*\*\*

**As the de Blasio administration strives to make greater social and economic equality its legacy, the neighborhoods that handle some of the city's most toxic materials are demanding a different sort of equity.**

On February 13th, scores of South Bronx and North Brooklyn residents assembled at City Hall to hear discussion of a bill aimed at addressing the relentless movement of the city's waste through their neighborhoods.

"We've had to live with this for decades; we're going to be living with this for decades more. Our children have had to grow up like this," observed Kellie Terry, Executive Director of The Point Community Development Corporation, based in the South Bronx.

The bill, which would cap the proportion of the city's waste processed in any one neighborhood, is the "first tangible, real attempt to address...the clustering and the over-concentration [of waste infrastructure] in a handful of environmentally overburdened communities of color," said Eddie Bautista, Executive Director of the [New York City Environmental Justice Alliance](#).

Eighty percent of the city's waste handling capacity, the Council reports, is located in just three neighborhoods—the South Bronx, [North Brooklyn](#) and Southeast Queens. The proposed legislation would also cut the amount of waste processed by transfer stations in those three areas by almost 20 percent.

The severity of the over-concentration of trash processing in low income communities and communities of color is "not just," said Terry in an interview outside a waste facility in the South Bronx. Trucks rumbled by continuously as we spoke. "It flies in the face of all of our

principles as a society, and especially of this current administration.”

Almost one-third of New York City’s trash is handled at waste transfer stations in the South Bronx, and then trucked or sent by rail to landfills across the region.

The relentless truck traffic, along with the presence of the waste transfer facilities themselves, has exacted a steep price from South Bronx residents.

A 2014 study by the state Comptroller found that the Bronx has the highest age-adjusted asthma death rate “by far” among all counties in New York State: 43.5 deaths per million residents in the Bronx, as opposed to the state average of 13.1 deaths per million.

Exposure to exhaust fumes is a known risk factor for asthma, the study noted.

The de Blasio administration does not support the proposed legislation, Intro 495. City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito, who represents sections of the South Bronx including Mott Haven, has not taken a position. The Speaker’s colleague in the South Bronx, Maria Del Carmen Arroyo, is a sponsor of the bill.

## **Establishing a Limit on Waste**

Every day, an average 21,000 tons of residential and commercial trash must pass through —and out of—New York City. Seventy percent of that daily trash volume is typically processed for long-distance shipment in just three neighborhoods: the South Bronx, North Brooklyn and Southeast Queens.

The Council hearing was led by Brooklyn Member and Sanitation Committee Chair Antonio Reynoso, who told the crowd that he had been born and raised on the south side of Williamsburg. The question of waste equity, he said, is the issue that is “most near and dear to my community.”



Antonio Reynoso is the current Chair of the New York City Council's Committee on Sanitation & Solid Waste Management, and Co-Chair of the Council's Progressive Caucus.

Reynoso referred to “a tale of two cities,” the phrase invoked by the Mayor to describe the inequities of life in contemporary New York City. “There’s no better place to look at that than North Brooklyn, the South Bronx, and Southeast Queens when it comes to how we handle trash,” Reynoso said.

Intro 495, which is sponsored by Council Member Reynoso and his colleague Steve Levin, also from North Brooklyn, seeks to do two things: first to cap, and then eventually reduce by 18 percent, the amount of waste that can be processed in the city’s three most over-burdened neighborhoods.

The legislation will also limit the amount of waste that can be handled in any of New York’s 51 community districts to five percent of the city’s total permitted capacity.

The legislation is “about bare bones principles of equity, bare bones principle of fair share,” said Kellie Terry. “This [the waste industry] will still be here [in the South Bronx], but it will be just a little less,” she added.

## **Concerns About Emergency Capacity**

Kathryn Garcia, Commissioner of the city's Department of Sanitation, told the City Council in testimony at last Friday's hearing that the neighborhood waste processing limits mandated by Council Member Reynoso's legislation could create dangerous logistical challenges for the City, especially during extreme weather and other emergency situations.

But, Commissioner Garcia said, the administration was prepared to immediately start negotiations with the city's 39 privately-run waste transfer stations regarding "voluntary reductions."

On a day-to-day basis, the city's waste transfer stations typically use about half of their total permitted waste capacity. This is not always the case though. In the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy, the need for waste transfer capacity soared because so much debris had to be trucked out of the city.

Action Carting, which is based in the South Bronx and delivers waste to transfer stations, told lawmakers at the hearing that the company operated at capacity for 30 days straight after Sandy.

Intro 495 would eliminate the excess capacity of transfer stations in the three most overburdened areas, and then cut that capacity further, shaving off 18 percent of what is currently being processed.

The bill does give Commissioner Garcia the ability to override neighborhood waste caps in the event of an emergency like Sandy.

But, she argued, if capacity reductions are mandated, waste transfer stations will scale back operations and they may not be able to respond as quickly as necessary. Losing all excess capacity, along with 18 percent more, in neighborhoods like the South Bronx would place real limits on the DSNY's operational flexibility, Garcia maintained.

At the same time, respond advocates, the City is also gaining capacity through the construction of a network of marine transfer stations.

## **2 to 3 Trash Trucks per Minute**

On a typical day, nearly 6,000 tons of trash is hauled in and out of the South Bronx, requiring about 1,400 diesel truck trips.

This means two to three truck trips every minute in the course of a typical eight to 10 hour business day.



Nine waste transfer stations operate in the area, mainly in Hunts Point and Mott Haven. According to New York Lawyers for the Public Interest, the stations have permits authorizing them to collectively handle twice their typical volume, nearly 12,000 tons of waste, daily.



The South Bronx hosts a range of waste facilities. Photo credit: Sarah Crean / NYER.

The South Bronx hosts other waste-related facilities, including a scrap metal recycling plant, and sites which collect fill (concrete, dirt, brick and asphalt).

According to NYLPI, about 2,000 of the 6,400 tons handled in the South Bronx on an average day in 2013 was residential. Residential trash is ultimately shipped by rail out of the Bronx via the Harlem River Yard, which is privately managed. The rest of the trash processed in the South Bronx is commercial waste, including construction and demolition debris.

[The Harlem River Yard is also the future site of a Fresh Direct distribution center, which has attracted strong community opposition because of concerns about more truck traffic.]

## **“Boxed In”**

And while the South Bronx has numerous expressways running through it, there is no direct access from those highways to some of the South Bronx's most important industrial areas. Trucks must travel on local streets to get from the Bruckner Expressway to the Hunts Point Peninsula, for instance.

In addition to waste transfer stations, Hunts Point is also home to the city's wholesale food markets. The markets generate enormous truck traffic, an estimated 15,000 trips daily, according to the City. To get to their destination, trucks must drive around and through the Point's community of 12,000 residents.

I joined Angela Tovar, Director of Policy and Research for Sustainable South Bronx, for a walk through Hunts Point. I was surprised by the tightness that began to build in my chest after a couple hours on local streets. When I listened to the audio recording of my interview with Tovar later, I could hear both of us coughing.



Angela Tovar speaks at a rally to support Intro 495. Photo credit: [@TeamstersJC16](#)

We watched as trucks passed schools, playgrounds and churches. The neighborhood's multiple truck routes have created a situation in which residents are literally "boxed in," said Tovar.

The traffic in and around Hunts Point is truly daunting. Trucks entering the area are coming

from both the Bruckner and Sheridan expressways. “Any street is fair game,” said Tovar.

Bruckner Boulevard, which runs under the expressway, feels like a canyon of truck traffic. Crossing eight lanes of traffic at Hunts Point Avenue and Bruckner Boulevard to reach the busy #6 subway stop there, said Tovar, reminded her of the game of Frogger.

## Cumulative Impact

Because of much of the area’s industrial zoning, and because of its status as a Significant Maritime Industrial Area, the South Bronx has long hosted a wide range of industrial and noxious uses.

“It’s the cumulative impact of all these other polluting industries that cause ultimately the disproportionate impact that is really abusive and oppressive to our communities,” said Kellie Terry.

The range of industrial activity is mind-boggling. In addition to the waste industry, the Hunts Point markets, and various factories, the South Bronx also has a wastewater treatment facility and four power plants in the vicinity.

Further complicating matters is the fact that some of the South Bronx’s manufacturing/industrial zones have been rezoned for mixed and residential uses. New residential construction is now closer than ever to industrial activity. A similar situation exists in North Brooklyn, which also struggles with waste-related truck traffic and air quality issues.

The South Bronx’s public health issues linked to air quality have been well documented in a variety of studies conducted by the City, State, and even Congress.

A 2009 NYU-Wagner Graduate School study reported that “rates of death from asthma are about three times higher in the Bronx than the national average. Hospitalization rates are about five times higher.”

The NYU study, funded through a Congressional appropriation, also found a “strong association between asthma hospitalization rates, poverty, the percentage of Hispanic residents, and the number of industrial facilities in the Bronx.”

As Kellie Terry noted, the South Bronx is grappling with social issues that “make our environmental impacts sometimes impossible to address.”



“We’re worried about poor educational situations, we’re worried about disproportionately high incarceration rates, we’re worried about police brutality, we’re worried about everything, all the time,” Terry said, as trucks roared by.



Kellie Terry, Executive Director of the Point CDC. Photo credit: [Adi Talwar/City Limits](#).

“This [the question of waste infrastructure] is one aspect of the fight,” she continued.

“You also have to fight all those other fights. That’s what it means to be within a community like this and to work towards resiliency. It’s not just environmental resiliency. But it’s also social resiliency.”

## Collecting Data at the Ground Level

Part of finding public policy solutions that will truly address the concerns of South Bronx residents is collecting the best data possible.

The most recent neighborhood-level air quality data available from the City is from 2009-2010. More data is forthcoming says the City.

In collaboration with two other organizations, Sunset Park-based Uprose and HabitatMap,



Sustainable South Bronx has launched an air quality monitoring program which utilizes wearable monitors. The monitor then transmits the air quality data to the wearer's cell phone.



The AirBeam, a wearable air monitor designed by Brooklyn-based environmental justice nonprofit HabitatMap. Photo credit: [AirBeam](#)

The data will help to pinpoint areas where there are higher concentrations of pollutants. Data has been collected by 80 people so far, both high school students and local residents. Tovar said several local schools plan to get involved.

The response from students and community groups has been “overwhelming,” said Tovar. “It’s been great. We really feel that we’ve been able to have this conversation about air quality and what it means,” she said.

After the data is analyzed, maps of the data points will be available at [aircasting.org](http://aircasting.org).

One of the most useful aspects of SSBx’s air quality monitoring program is that the data is being collected at ground level.

Both the State and City have air quality monitors in the Bronx. The City has four monitors in Bronx community districts one and two, said Levi Fishman, a spokesman for the City’s

Department of Health. The City's monitors are affixed 10 to 12 feet above ground level, on street or utility poles. The State's monitoring stations are located on the tops of buildings.

"The pollution that we're facing is on the ground...The impact is there," said Tovar. "[We are] directly being impacted by tail pipes and truck idling."

Collecting data from a multitude of locations—at ground level—will help to develop a more accurate picture of the air quality experienced by South Bronx residents. It may also shed light on why South Bronx hospitalization and death rates from asthma are so extraordinary.



A smoggy view of Manhattan from the Bronx. Photo credit: [Axel Drainville](#)/Creative Commons.

The City's 2009-2010 data for fine-particulate matter pollution levels, for example, show Midtown and Stuyvesant Town, both in Manhattan, with the highest mean concentrations citywide. But these neighborhoods do not have air quality-related health issues similar in scope to those in the South Bronx.

"Harmful air pollutants are found in all neighborhoods of NYC," said Levi Fishman. "The health impacts of air quality depend on the number of people with health conditions, like asthma or cardio-vascular disease, that air pollution exacerbates. Outdoor air pollution isn't the only, or even the major, cause of those conditions," he argued.

The City’s assertion would seem to be challenged by the 2009 NYU-Wagner School study, which found a “strong association between Bronx zip codes with high asthma rates and those with a large concentration of industrial facilities.”

Clearly more information is needed about what South Bronx residents are actually breathing. The NYU-Wagner School study collected air quality data at ground level, and the study’s authors reported that levels of some pollutants—carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxide, and sulfur dioxide—were higher than those recorded from the State’s rooftop monitors.

## Curbing Emissions

The City has tried to mitigate some of the air quality effects of truck traffic in communities like the South Bronx. It has upgraded its entire DSNY fleet to ultra-low sulfur diesel fuel.



A hybrid electric DSNY garbage truck. Photo credit: [ALF Condor](#).

A City ordinance now requires private waste trucks -which pick up commercial trash- to retrofit over the next five years using the best emissions reduction technologies available.

And the Department of Transportation operates a Clean Trucks program in Hunts Point and



Port Morris, which offers rebates to private truck owners who retrofit their trucks to use alternative fuels such as hybrid electric and compressed natural gas, or make other improvements. The program's funds are currently exhausted.

Environmental justice advocates across the city are trying to tackle the emissions problem by crafting a new approach to the private-sector waste industry.

Through an initiative called [Transform Don't Trash NYC](#), they are calling for the establishment of a contractual relationship between waste carting companies and the City. This would enable the City to more strictly control truck emissions, organize more efficient pick-up routes, and better enforce health and safety standards for waste industry workers.

## **DSNY Truck Traffic to be “Greatly Reduced”**

In her testimony, Commissioner Garcia said that the City was sensitive to the concerns of South Bronx residents, and other communities, who endure the impact of thousands of diesel trucks on local streets every day.

She pointed out that once the City is able to open all of its Marine Transfer Stations, as outlined in the City's [2006 Solid Waste Management Plan](#), waste-related truck traffic would be “greatly reduced.” Eighty-eight percent of the city's residential waste would eventually be shipped out of the city by barge or rail, the Commissioner said.

The SWMP would lead to a reduction of 55 million DSNY vehicle miles travelled annually, Garcia said, along with additional reductions in commercial carter traffic. Air quality benefits will stretch across the region, the City maintains.

Advocates argue that the opening of the marine transfer stations, and the creation of this additional capacity, goes hand in hand with capping the waste handling burden in each community.

“We have to balance what they [DSNY] operationally would like in terms of their comfort zone with the on the ground reality that communities are choking on this stuff,” said Eddie Bautista. “It's not fair for the department to get all this excess marine transfer station capacity and not reduce the noxious capacity.”

Bautista said that because meaningful voluntary capacity reductions had not materialized since the passage of SWMP, mandating them was consistent with the provisions of the plan. “That's part of the deal...anything short of an actual reduction in these communities is an undermining of the 2006 SWMP.”

## Thinking About the Future

What concerns advocates in particular is the city's enormous commercial waste stream, which is as large or even larger than its residential waste stream.

Some of the city's commercial waste, including some construction and demolition debris, will move through DSNY's to-be-opened marine transfer stations, but not all of it. The remainder will go to land-based waste transfer stations.

Angela Tovar argued that the City needs to plan ahead to protect its neighborhoods, especially in this current period of major construction and development.

The fundamental point of the waste cap legislation, Tovar said, is to ensure that, "no other community in the future will have to bear the brunt of the city's waste."

## Beyond the SWMP: Transforming NYC's Relationship to Trash

The back-drop to all of these efforts is the City's execution of the 2006 Solid Waste Management Plan. Local opposition to construction of a DSNY Marine Transfer Station at East 91st Street and the East River has attracted the most media attention by far of any aspect of the plan.

The de Blasio administration has resolutely pushed ahead, and Commissioner Garcia said last Friday that at least two marine transfer stations should be on-line in the next two years- Hamilton Avenue in Brooklyn, and the North Shore facility in Flushing, Queens.

Three other marine transfer stations –one in southwest Brooklyn, and two in Manhattan, at East 91st Street and West 59th Street- will start operation as well. Trash shipment by rail will also increase as part of the SWMP.

And the City is planning to develop a major recycling and educational facility at Gansevoort Pier in the West Village.

For the first time, each borough will be directly involved in handling some of its own waste.



A line of DSNY trucks in Queens, New York. Photo credit: [Kris Arnold](#).

The city's three most over-burdened communities will be impacted in different ways by the SWMP. Council Member Maria Del Carmen Arroyo, who represents sections of the South Bronx including Hunts Point, said that the South Bronx would probably benefit most from the addition of the West 59th Street station, which will receive construction and demolition debris.

"My community is asking me to do this [support the SWMP]," Arroyo said by phone.

The Councilwoman added that New York City needed to confront the bigger issue, which is the amount of waste it produces. "We're not talking about real recycling...reducing tonnage...The SWMP addresses one small part."

"The merits of the plan put us in the right direction," maintained Kellie Terry. The task, she said, was to "continuously...assess...our current policies for ways to improve them so they can be more just, ultimately for everybody."

Bautista praised a number of the City's initiatives, such as increasing household composting, and using anaerobic digestion to turn organic waste into energy. The City, he said, was finally turning its attention to decreasing waste and reducing its carbon footprint.



The “top priority,” Bautista said, “is that however we’re handling our solid waste as a city, that we’re not being hypocritical. We want fair share and environmental justice, not just for our communities, but for those landfills in Pennsylvania, Virginia, wherever else we’re sending our waste. We should be figuring out how to handle that [waste] closer to home, and the way you do it is you reduce waste and increase recycling.”

## **Standing His Ground**

For Council Member Antonio Reynoso, establishing limits on the quantity of waste that can be handled in each of the city’s neighborhoods is the next piece of this enormous puzzle.

A number of Council Members raised questions about the legislation at last week’s hearing, arguing that setting waste caps would simply push trash processing into more neighborhoods, causing widespread harm.

Other Members said they were ready to help shoulder some of the City’s trash burden. “The Upper West Side wants to do more,” said Council Member Helen Rosenthal, saying that she saw opportunities for job creation with the overhaul of a marine transfer station at West 59th Street. “Bring it on.”

After a direct plea from representatives of the private waste industry for a delay to moving ahead with Intro 495 and a “dialogue” with the Council and affected communities, Reynoso responded, “we just can’t wait.”

“This piece of legislation has been going on for a long time [8 years],” Reynoso said at the tail-end of Friday’s 5-hour hearing. “There’s no solution [coming] from the other side...We need to get something done because my community can’t wait anymore, and that’s why we’re pushing.”

Intro 495 is currently under review by the Sanitation Committee.

## **Shifting the Paradigm**

In the meantime, residents of the South Bronx have moved ahead with their own sustainability agenda, even as they continue to press the City for waste caps.

“This idea that this is an overburdened community is only part of the story,” said Angela Tovar. “There is a paradigm shift,” she added.

“The other side of the story,” Tovar said, “is that groups and activists are working in tandem to be proactive about solutions...People have a right to clean air and clean water.”

Local groups are pressing the City about improving the quality of the Bronx River, which is impacted by the discharge of over one billion gallons of untreated sewage and stormwater annually.

South Bronx residents have fought successfully for increased access to amenities, access to green space, and access to the waterfront. The community is now seeking to expand the South Bronx Greenway, which, when completed, will connect existing and new parks through a network of waterfront and on-street routes.

“We have a limited amount of green space in the community,” said Tovar. “We engage a lot of people locally in maintaining the trees. Anything that is going to help improve the air quality is very important to us. Trees are one of the only interventions that we have.”

Local groups have also collaborated with businesses to build green infrastructure projects, such as the green roof installed on ABC Carpet’s Bronx River warehouse.

Angela Tovar and I stopped at [Barretto Point Park](#), which occupies a scenic spot on the East River. The roar from passing trucks was ceaseless as we spoke.

Built in 2007, Barretto Point Park was a victory for local residents and is “one of the treasures of the community,” said Tovar. “The challenge is getting people here safely.”



Barretto Point Park is located on the East River waterfront. Photo credit: [NYC Parks](#).

Tovar described lines of Hunts Point residents waiting to use the park's floating pool during the summer. The park is also a destination for fishermen, she said.

"[But] two blocks away we have transfer stations," she pointed out. On a windy day, Tovar said, fumes and debris can blow into the Park from the stations. Private transfer stations are sometimes open to the elements, which I saw firsthand. The City's marine transfer stations will be fully enclosed.

One of the city's wastewater treatment facilities, which is heavily served by trucks, is also close to the Park.

"It's a challenge for us," Tovar said, looking out at the beautiful coastline of Barretto Point.

Then she turned her gaze back toward the passing trucks. "We are continuously looking for solutions," she said.

The Hunts Point Recycling Center sits on the Bronx River, adjacent to the Hunts Point Riverside Park.

Photo credit: [Erik Madsen](#)



**historical average:**  
**54°F high / 38°F low**  
New York, NY 10029

10029 Search

Current: 93.3% | Normal: 93.0%

# We're Reading

New York City Must End Environmental Racism [New York Slant](#)  
Scientists Map Genome of New York's Bedbugs [The New York Times](#)  
Supreme Court Delivers Victory For Environment [Eco Politics Daily](#)  
With a 1.5 Degrees Celsius Target, the Climate-Justice Movement Is Poised to Score a Surprise Win [The Nation](#)  
Researchers Evaluate Contaminants in Community Garden Soils in New York City [News Medical](#)