

Handling the City's Trash

by Gotham Gazette Staff
Monday, July 28, 2003 12:00 AM

The Queens neighborhoods of St. Albans, Hollis, and Cambria Heights have a distinctly suburban appearance with single-family homes, lawns, and quiet, well-kept streets. However, these seemingly pleasant, middle-class African-American neighborhoods are also home to much of the borough's garbage.

Six of the county's 20 waste transfer stations - temporary dumps where trash is collected and repackaged before being shipped out to land-fills – are located here, some just a few hundred feet from homes. Thousands of tons of garbage are transported through the area every week and residents complain about odors, rodents, and dust.

For an elected official representing the areas in the City Council - or for a challenger trying to win the seat - trash is a major campaign issue.

"Our district is over-saturated with these sites," said Councilmember Leroy Comrie, who was elected to represent district 27 two years ago. "I have been very active in protesting their proposed expansion in my district."

Helen Cooper-Gregory, a lawyer and one of two Democratic challengers seeking Comrie's council seat, goes further than opposing their expansion; she wants them shut down. "These sites should not be located where they are in the first place," said Cooper-Gregory. "If zoning laws were enforced properly, this would never have happened."

But getting rid of the transfer stations is a difficult proposition, another lawyer and Democratic challenger, Stephen Jackson, admitted. "It's a problem of 'not in my backyard,'" he said. "While it is very easy to say we do not want these dumpsites, it is undeniable that they must exist somewhere." Jackson advocates for extensive community involvement in monitoring the environmental and safety conditions of the dumpsites.

The trash issue also highlights a challenge that faces every City Council member - balancing time and responsibilities at City Hall and the concerns of voters in the district.

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Since taking office, Comrie has become an influential part of the council, serving as the head of the Queens delegation and Democratic Majority Whip, working closely with Council Speaker Gifford Miller. His challengers claim that the incumbent's attention is focused too much on citywide issues and not on things like the garbage sites.

Another key example, charged Cooper-Gregory, was the property tax hike of 18.5 percent, which the council passed in November 2002. The bill to raise the tax passed through the City Council in just 11 days, and she said, Comrie did not hold a town hall meeting for citizens to voice their opinions and for officials to explain why it was needed.

Cooper-Gregory said she would have tried to seek a lower increase; Jackson said he would have voted against the property tax increase. Comrie defends his vote on the property tax hike saying it enabled the council to preserve recycling, police, fire, and after-school programs and other services that would have otherwise been cut. "It had to be done in order to generate revenue necessary to keep public services functioning within our district," he said.

While the candidates may not agree on the issue of taxes, they all agree that education is a top priority.

Comrie sees a greater need to engage parents in Mayor Michael Bloomberg's reform of the education system. "The new system is complex, and parents must become involved for it to succeed," he said.

Jackson agreed, adding that a council member must demonstrate "proactive, aggressive leadership" for the system to work. Cooper-Gregory pointed to funding as the primary challenge, and advocates increasing the budget for school supplies and teacher training.

All three candidates running in 2003 faced off two years ago in the 2001 primary. In a tight race, Comrie came out ahead of Cooper-Gregory by just 177 votes.

Predicting the outcome of any council race is always difficult and in 2001, the polls were particularly skewed. Jackson went to bed on primary night after the television station NY1

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reported he had a 4 percent lead. He woke up the next morning to find he had lost by more than 3,000 votes and finished fifth out of six candidates. Jackson filed a lawsuit to look into the election results, but later withdrew his case to focus on running again.

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Campaign Update:

Stephen C. Jackson was removed from the ballot by the Board of Elections in late July. This leaves the incumbent Leroy Comrie running against his main 2001 opponent, Helen Cooper-Gregory. Comrie, however, has the financial edge, having raised \$133,057 in campaign funds to Cooper-Gregory's \$34,684.

Updated August 29, 2003