by Sam Williams
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From an environmental perspective, 2005 is shaping up to be a good year here in New York City. Nearly a half-dozen laws designed to curb vehicle emissions and improve local air quality have sailed through the New York City Council and earned the mayor's signature. A similar accord on energy-efficient "green buildings" is in the works. And despite a much publicized battle over waste reduction and marine transfer station siting, the city's solid waste management plan appears to be on its most solid footing in years.

It seems strange, then, that environmental issues have yet to find their way into the ongoing mayoral debate, apart from discussions of congestion-pricing and the proposed Brooklyn-to-New Jersey railroad tunnel. It doesn't help that the New York League of Conservation Voters, an organization that normally conducts an exhaustive endorsement process (and that endorsed Michael Bloomberg's opponent Mark Green in the 2001 campaign), has decided to issue no endorsement at all for the Democratic mayoral primary race, and instead come out early in support of Michael Bloomberg's re-election. ("Four years ago, Michael Bloomberg had a lot of interesting ideas but he had no track record," says Marcia Bystryn, the league's executive director. "We feel the mayor has taken a strong leadership role on a range of issues...")

Voters thus have been cheated out of a chance to review and compare some impressive resumes. More importantly, they've missed a frank discussion of priorities when it comes to city-level environmental policy. After all, in a city of 8 million people, only a few issues can command top billing and as the last few years have shown, such issues have a way of pitting one environmental concern against another -- clean drinking water vs. parkland preservation, just to cite one notable example.

With this in mind, a review of the top candidates' environmental agendas show four main areas where differences in opinion or variations in enthusiasm stand to shape mayoral priorities over the next four years.

## WATER QUALITY

Since 1998, New York City has been obligated by a federal court order to filter at least 10 percent of the drinking water coming out of the Croton Valley watershed. Mayor Michael Bloomberg's attempt to end more than a decade's worth of city footdragging and authorize the construction of a $1.3 billion filtration plant was one of the decisions that earned him the eventual endorsement of the New York League of Conservation Voters.

In pushing through a plan to site the plant within the boundaries of Van Cortlandt Park, however, the mayor has quite possibly earned the ever-lasting enmity of park advocates. The mayor has since balanced the loss of green space with $240 million in new funds for Van Cortlandt and other Bronx parks, but from the park advocates' perspective, the exploitation of city owned green space sets a dangerous precedent which other mayors will be tempted to exploit.

When the Ben Franklin Democratic Reform Democratic Club played host to a town hall forum in the Bronx in May, Democratic challengers were hard pressed to deliver an outright condemnation of the mayor's decision-making. Only Anthony Weiner, a Queens congressman with a solid record for channeling federal money to city parks, seemed unequivocal on the matter. Weiner blasted the "closed loop" nature of the negotiation process and the precedent-setting use of park land for industrial purposes. Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields, an opponent of the Van Cortlandt siting in the late 1990s said she remained opposed but doubted such opposition could have an effect if elected. " In all fairness and candor," Fields told the audience., "Unless you have a different way of approaching [the plant], I don't think as mayor I could stop it, as it has been started."

City Council Speaker Gifford Miller admitted that he had voted for the use of the park while adding that more could have been done to acquire watershed land upstate to head off development and protect water quality. Former Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer's comments were conspicuously absent in a summary of the forum filed by the RiverdaleReview.com, although the candidate is on the record opposing the Van Cortlandt filtration plant as far back as 1999.

”As far as I know, Mr. Weiner is the only candidate solidly opposed to the plant," says Marian Rose, president of the Croton Watershed Clean Water Coalition, a group which does not endorse candidates.

In their answers to the League of Conservation Voters questionnaire (which they have not posted on their Web site, and may never), every Democratic candidate said yes to the question of whether they would direct city agencies to establish a goal of shielding 50 percent of the land surrounding the city's other main water source, the Catskill/Delaware watershed land, by 2015. In his own answer to the question, the mayor did not offer a yes or no response but noted that, under his administration, the city increased its share of watershed control and

would continue pursuing acquisitions via the city's Department of Environmental Protection.

"Because the city cannot force or require landowners to sell their land, and because the city is not permitted to purchase land for a price above fair market value, the administration has decided against setting a ten-year goal for watershed protection," the mayor's response reads.

In the case of local waterways, the mayor and the Democratic challengers have expressed a uniform commitment to the reduction of pollutants and nitrogen in the East River and Long Island Sound. In the questionnaire, however, most, including the mayor, felt that current programs, most notably the Department of Environmental Protection's EPA-mandated elimination of combined rainwater and sewage systems, would elicit the desired improvements over time. In terms of creative remedies, Ferrer proposed artificial wetlands, seaweed farms, and other "low cost, simple solutions" above and beyond the existing work by the city department.

## SOLID WASTE

New York City's mammoth solid waste output is a case study in conflicting environmental agendas. In seeking to move the city away from its current truck-dependent waste export model back to a barge-based plan involving reactivated marine transfer stations, the mayor has chosen to stress two environmental benefits -- reduced diesel exhaust and fuel consumption -- above all others.

In City Council Speaker Gifford Miller's spring challenge to the mayor's sanitation plan, he spoke up for those long troubled by the lack of waste reduction incentives in the city's current waste management strategy. The new solid waste management plan, passed this summer, makes room for more ambitious recycling than in the past, but advocates say the program's goal of 25 percent of garbage being recycled is too low.

The mayor headed off an 11th hour challenge by Gifford and his council allies. Still, the Democratic candidates say that waste reduction and waste transport efficiency remain signature challenges for the city.

"There is no lack of ideas in the environmental community for materials recovery," argues

Fields, who says the city can use its power as a large contract consumer to pressure manufacturers to reduce packaging and offer more support in the repair or reclamation of aging products. Together with Weiner, Fields is a hearty endorser of "pay as you throw" incentive programs which would give homeowners and building-owners who put less garbage on the curb a rebate on their property taxes.

"Conscientious New Yorkers should get a signal of support from the city, rather than having to pay for the waste of their neighbors," says Weiner.

**Bottle Bill**

Both Weiner and Fields have joined Ferrer as backers of the Better Bottle Bill, a recently-passed state bill which would expand bottle deposits to non-carbonated beverages and which would return unclaimed deposits to local governments to use in their own internal waste management and recycling programs. According to Laura Haight, an Albany lobbyist for the New York Public Interest Research Group, a signature by Governor George Pataki or his successor could mean up to $100 million in annual proceeds for New York City alone.

"We need the next mayor to step up to the plate and fight in Albany with us to get our nickels back," says Haight, whose non-partisan group does not endorse any candidates.

The mayor, who has come out in favor of a straight five cent-per-bottle tax over an expansion of the existing deposit law, emphasizes private sector efficiency over government incentives. The reactivation of marine transfer stations authorized by the solid waste management plan will make it easier to ship recyclables in bulk to the coming Hugo Neu facility on Brooklyn's Sunset Park waterfront. This should free up the company to invest in technologies which speed sorting, improve recovery, and possibly encourage expansion into other portions of the city waste stream. For similar reasons, the Bloomberg administration has focused its transportation efforts on reviving the rail link between Visy Paper's Staten Island paper recycling facility and the Howland Hook Marine Terminal. SUSTAINABILITY

In its 2005 Mayoral Scorecard grading the Bloomberg administration's first term performance, the New York League of Conservation Voters reserved its lowest score ("average") for the mayor's efforts in the realm of sustainability and sustainable development. Although Bloomberg established his Task Force on Sustainability to examine the city's own internal policies, concerns about clean water, clean air and Sanitation have taken precedence over the last four years.

Expect that to change. The city council is considering Intro 324, a bill which, if enacted, would require building projects greater than $2 million in scope to meet national energy efficiency and other "green" standards set out by the U.S. Green Building Council. Similar bills to encourage the use of heat-reducing "green roof" materials and to press the city to incorporate green building standards into its own buildings and facilities are also in the works. Meanwhile, the Bloomberg administration is backing the potential offering of water and energy rebates to private sector companies via a separate bill, Intro 478.

This is the one issue where City Council Speaker Miller stands out, as a sponsor or supporter of these green bills. "We need to support more innovative legislation," says Miller in response to the League of Conservation Voters questionnaire. "As mayor, I plan to focus on the same issues I have as speaker -- reducing the city's use of materials and emissions, encouraging green building practices by developers, and protecting quality of life by working for parks and expanding and improving mass transit."

Some candidates, however, would like to see even more creativity when it comes to giving residents and workers a stake in city resource conservation. According to Weiner, the city shouldn't just aim for monitoring the energy demand within its own departments -- already a Bloomberg administration aim -- it should give departments that demonstrate improving efficiency a cut of the cost savings. Meanwhile, Fields sees the everyday consumer as a true swing vote in the attempt to force industry-wide change. She holds up the city's large scale buying power as an effective stick but also sees incentives such as the low-flow toilet rebate as a model for how the city should reward consumers who install heat deflecting roofs or reduce their energy demand

"My preference is reward positive behavior rather than punish negative behavior," says Fields.

## AIR QUALITY

Although the city earned a failing grade for air quality in four of its five boroughs in April, the resulting media coverage has facilitated the passage of recent laws seeking to increase the number of hybrid taxicabs and low sulfur diesel buses on city streets.

Where things go from here, however, is up in the air. Under Mayor Bloomberg, the city joined Attorney General Eliott Spitzer and other regional attorneys general in their successful effort to force out-of-state energy companies to clean up their coal-burning power plants, a major source of air pollution here in the northeast. Some of the Democratic mayoral candidates, however, think the city could be even more audacious in this strategy. Former Bronx Borough President Ferrer has suggesed emulating the attorney general's equally successful campaign against truck and bus idling and "create a city-wide zero idling rule on school buses with increased fines and eventual suspensions of any driver who continually puts our children's health at risk." Manhattan Borough President Fields, again, feels that incentives for "good corporate citizens" are the better route.

Congressman Weiner, meanwhile, is the one candidate who sees ferry service as the missing piece in the city's current air quality puzzle. "An expanded network of ferries would shorten commute times and develop a healthier means of transit," Weiner told the New York League of Conservation Voters.

Cross-Harbor Rail Link

Where the mayor and the Democrats most notably part ways, however, is on the proposed Cross-Harbor rail link, a $700 million project which would link New Jersey to Brooklyn, reducing the number of current trans-Hudson truck trips by 11 percent according to project supporters. Then again, the same project would dramatically increase the number of short haul truck trips ending in Maspeth, Queens, the link's easternmost terminus. Citing the increased air pollution burden on Queens residents, Mayor Bloomberg has opposed the plan. Every Democratic challenger, meanwhile, supports the cross harbor link.

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