by John McGutrick
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In less than two years, Staten Island's Fresh Kills landfill, the last in New York City, will close. Creating an alternative system that will manage the post-Fresh Kills disposal of the 13,000 tons of residential garbage the City generates each day presents a tremendous opportunity to rationalize its solid waste management and create opportunity where now there are only problems.

Unfortunately, the Giuliani Administration has not taken advantage of the opportunities this transition offers. There has been no attempt to reduce the waste stream through aggressive recycling, nor to minimize the creation of neighborhood-disrupting new garbage facilities by converting to new uses the existing Marine Transfer Stations that will no longer have a purpose once Fresh Kills closes. Nor has there been any serious exploration of new waste management technologies which might, for instance, convert garbage to pollution reducing ethanol. Instead, the City has allowed a siting process to go forward that does not minimize community impacts, but rather shifts the burden of garbage management from Staten Island residents to poorer, minority neighborhoods in Brooklyn and the South Bronx.

For years, the City has ignored the law and refused to obey siting regulations designed to prevent this conflict producing opportunism. Even after losing in State courts on two occasions, there is still no genuine City compliance with either the specifics or intent of the law. As a result, garbage transfer stations, with their foul odors, noise and vermin, continue to be located next to parks, residences and churches in poor communities. In addition, the number of such facilities that can operate in a given area remains unrestricted.

I live in one of these communities, Red Hook, Brooklyn, which is now targeted for one of the largest waste facilities on the East Coast.

Red Hook is an old waterfront community with a rich, working class history. First settled by the Dutch in 1636, Red Hook was home to tide mills (mills which depended on the ebb and flow of the tide to turn the mill wheels) and later to ships and their support industries. By the Civil War, Red Hook was a thriving community of industrial and residential uses with a population of approximately 23,000. The factories and homes of the mid-19th century, are the housing stock and commercial/industrial spaces that exist today, which make Red Hook attractive for both residential and industrial uses.

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Today, Red Hook is a one square mile peninsula, cut off from the rest of the City by the physical barrier of the Gowanus Elevated Expressway and the Brooklyn Battery tunnel, and isolated by the lack of subway service. Its current population is 12,000, with a median income of $10,500. Its residents are ninety percent African-American and Hispanic. Low income housing is 87% of the total housing stock. Red Hook already has five waste transfer stations, including a City municipal marine transfer station (MTS) with a capacity of 4800 tons of garbage per day. It is also the location for waste industry support facilities and other noxious uses such as an oil depot, chemical plants, impound lots, and bus depots (many of which are unpaved) The air shaft for the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel, through which 70,000 vehicles travel each day, vents into the neighborhood. A number of brownfields are a further burden on neighborhood quality of life. Industrial zoning that was foisted upon the community in 1961 has decimated neighborhoods and produced large tracts of vacant land that make the community a prime candidate when a site for a noxious use is needed.

In recent years, the Red Hook community has struggled to revitalize itself by getting rid of such noxious uses and by gaining access to its own waterfront, a hitherto undiscovered treasure and the one place from which the Statue of Liberty can be viewed face-on. A pier was recently renovated for public access and several waterfront esplanades have been opened. Red Hook also boasts New York's only working trolleys. Red Hook is a diamond in the rough. It has some of the most stunning waterfront in the region with its commanding views not only of Lady Liberty, but also of the Manhattan Skyline and New York Bay. It is home to the Civil War Era waterfront warehouses and it is less than 1000 feet from Governor's Island.

At a time of growing national consensus about the need to control sprawl, it is critical that communities such as Red Hook are redeveloped to their fullest potential. They can offer a quality of urban life that can compete with the lure of the suburbs. Not to recognize and foster this potential would be a profound failure of civic imagination, one that would present major issues of environmental justice as well.

Working in concert with other communities through The Organization of Waterfront Neighborhoods (OWN), major environmental groups and elected officials, the Red Hook Civic Association and the Red Hook community intends to see that this opportunity is not missed and the interests of the community, which are the interests of the City, shall prevail.

John McGutrick is a member of the Red Hook Civic Association