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HEADLINE: Time to Move on Solid Waste

BODY:

The debate over what to do with New York City's trash has not been blessed with common sense and political will. Since Mayor Rudolph Giuliani closed the city's only landfill five years ago, New York has been asked to make do with a stopgap system of trucks to haul away tens of thousands of tons of daily rubbish. Mayor Michael Bloomberg has found a better way to manage the city's solid waste. His plan would get trucks off the road and make each borough responsible for its own trash. It spreads the burden, reduces the concentration of waste transfer sites in poorer communities and shifts from diesel-spewing trucks to barges and rail.

Because the plan's placement of transfer sites hangs together like a Calder mobile, the City Council should adopt it without too much tampering. There would be four city-operated marine transfer sites for residential trash: two in Brooklyn, one in Queens and one in Manhattan. Other sites will handle commercial waste and recycling. There would be three privately-run marine transfer stations for residential trash, once each in the Bronx, Brooklyn and Queens.

Council members will have to stand up to muscular opposition to the proposed Manhattan facilities: the marine transfer station on East 91st Street, a commercial waste site on West 59th Street and a recycling point at Gansevoort, on the Lower West Side. Christine Quinn, the speaker, has already shown an impressively independent streak on lobbying reform. Now she is backing the Gansevoort station, which is in her Lower West Side district. In doing so, Ms. Quinn has taken on supporters of the Hudson River Park, who challenge the site's legality and express understandable concerns about its impact on park space. A recycling transfer point need not harm the park or its use. Gansevoort now has garages for sanitation trucks and a storage site for salt to de-ice roads. These would be torn down. The transfer station would use some of that land; the rest would be park.

Ms. Quinn's predecessor, Gifford Miller, opposed the East 91st Street marine transfer station in his district. But he never offered a better idea and neither has anyone else. As for West 59th Street, a commercial waste site is without question necessary for Manhattan, which produces 40 percent of business trash.

Privately run transfer stations would take about half of the city's residential trash away, most likely by rail. The other half, from the city-operated transfer stations, would likely be sent by barge to a single terminal for loading onto rail cars, then sent to landfills in other states.

It makes sense to have a central receiving terminal for city barges. But it could also present a choke point just where the trash is supposed to leave New York for good. Michael McMahon,

a councilman from Staten Island, where the terminal is likely to be, favors redundancy in the system. He has a point. The city should not rule out sending trash barges to other ports, perhaps in New Jersey.

The overall plan should also seek to expand recycling to businesses, schools and government offices, where efforts are cursory at best. Ultimately, the task of successfully managing trash will require not just burial or incineration, but reuse and reduction of rubbish as well.

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