

New York: Garbage Capital of the World

by Lester R. Brown

The question of what to do with the 11,000 tons of garbage produced each day in New York City has again surfaced, this time with Mayor Michael Bloomberg's budget, which proposes to halt the recycling of metal, glass and plastic to save money. Unfortunately, this would mean more garbage to dispose of when the goal should be less.

The city's garbage problem has three faces. It is an economic problem, an environmental challenge, and a potential public relations nightmare. When the Fresh Kills landfill, the local destination for New York's garbage, was permanently closed in March 2001, the city found itself hauling garbage to distant landfill sites in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Virginia – some of the sites 300 miles away.

Assuming a load of 20 tons of garbage for each of the tractor trailers used for the long-distance

hauling, some 550 rigs are needed to move garbage from New York City each day. These tractor trailers form a convoy nearly nine miles long, impeding traffic, polluting the air, and raising carbon emissions. This daily convoy led Deputy Mayor Joseph J. Lhota, who supervised the Fresh Kills shutdown, to say that getting rid of the city's trash is now "like a military-style operation on a daily basis."

Instead of rapidly reducing the amount of garbage generated as Fresh Kills was filling, the decision was made simply to haul it all elsewhere. Fiscally strapped local communities in other states are willing to take New York's garbage – if they are paid enough. Some see it as a bonanza. For the state governments, however, that are saddled with increased road maintenance costs, the arrangement is not so attractive. They also have to contend with the traffic congestion, noise, increased air pollution, and complaints from nearby communities.

Virginia Governor Jim Gilmore wrote to Mayor Rudy Giuliani in 2001 complaining about the use of Virginia as a dumping ground. "I understand the problem New York faces," he noted. "But the home state of Washington, Jefferson and Madison has no intention of becoming New York's dumping ground."

The new governor of Virginia, Mark Warner, proposed in early April 2002 a tax of \$5 per ton on all solid waste deposited in Virginia. This is expected to generate an annual cash flow of \$76 million for the Virginia treasury, but it will not help New York with its economic woes.

In Pennsylvania, the General Assembly is considering legislation that would restrict garbage imports from other states. As landfills in adjacent states begin to fill up, there will be progressively fewer sites to take New York's garbage, pushing disposal costs ever higher.

Landfilling garbage uses land. For every 40,000 tons of garbage added to a landfill at least one acre of land is lost to future use. A large surrounding area is also lost as the landfill with its potentially toxic wastes must be isolated from residential areas.

Mayor Bloomberg's office has proposed incineration as the solution to the garbage mess. But burning 11,000 tons of garbage each day will only add to air pollution, making already unhealthy city air even worse. Like hauling the garbage to distant sites, incineration treats the symptoms, not the causes of New York's mountain of garbage.

The amount of garbage produced in the city is a manifestation of a more fundamental problem – the evolution of a global throwaway

Lester Brown, in this essay, looks to one of the domestic strains resulting from monumental levels of consumption. Copyright 2002, the "Alert" was published by the Earth Policy Institute on April 17.

economy. Throwaway products, facilitated by the appeal to convenience and the artificially low cost of energy, account for much of the garbage we produce. (See Chapter 6 of *Eco-Economy*.)

It is easy to forget how many throwaway products there are until we actually begin making a list. We have substituted facial tissues for handkerchiefs, disposable paper towels for hand towels, disposable table napkins for cloth napkins, and throwaway beverage containers for refillable ones. In perhaps the ultimate insult, the shopping bags that are used to carry home throwaway products are themselves designed to be discarded, becoming part of the garbage flow. The question at the supermarket checkout counter, "Paper or plastic?" should be replaced with, "Do you have your canvas shopping bag with you?"

The challenge we now face is to replace the throwaway economy with a reduce/ reuse/ recycle economy. The earth can no longer tolerate the pollution, the energy use, the disruption from mining, and the deforestation that the throwaway economy requires. For cities like New York, the challenge is not so much what to do with the garbage as it is how to avoid producing it in the first place.

New York recycles only 18 percent of its municipal waste. Los Angeles recycles 44 percent and Chicago 47 percent. Seattle and Minneapolis are both near 60 percent recycling rates. But even they are not close to exploiting the full potential of garbage recycling.

There are many ways of shrinking the daily mountain of

garbage. One is simply to ban the use of one-way beverage containers, something that Denmark and Finland have done. Denmark, for example, banned one-way soft drink containers in 1977 and beer containers in 1981. If Mayor Bloomberg wants a closer example of this approach, he need only go to Prince Edward Island in Canada, which has adopted a similar ban on one-way containers.

There are other gains from reusing beverage containers. Since refillable containers are simply back-hauled to the original soft drink or brewery bottling sites by the same trucks that deliver the beverages, they reduce not only garbage but also traffic congestion, energy use, and air pollution.

We have the technologies to recycle virtually all the components of garbage. For example, Germany now gets 72 percent of its paper from recycled fiber. With glass, aluminum, and plastic, potential recycling rates are even higher.

The nutrients in garbage can also be recycled by composting organic materials, including yard waste, table waste, and produce waste from supermarkets. Each year, the world mines 139 million tons of phosphate rock and 20 million tons of potash to obtain the phosphorus and potassium needed to replace the nutrients that crops remove from the soil. Urban composting that would return nutrients to the land could greatly reduce this expenditure on nutrients and the disruption caused by their

mining.

Yet another garbage-reducing step in this fiscally stressed situation would be to impose a tax on all throwaway products, in effect a landfill tax, so that those who use throwaway products would directly bear the cost of disposing of them. This would increase revenues while

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reducing garbage disposal expenditures, helping to reduce the city's fiscal deficit.

There are numerous win-win solutions that are economically attractive, environmentally desirable, and that will help avoid the unfolding public relations debacle created by the image of New York as garbage capital of the world.

A response to this situation that treats the causes rather than the symptoms of garbage generation could work wonders for the city. •