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A Necessary War on Garbage Trucks

HENRY GRABAR 11:18 AM ET 4 COMMENTS



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Sustainable waste management has a rather zen mantra: it's not just where the trash goes — it's how it gets there.

Trains and boats are in; pneumatic tubes may even be considered; trucks are emphatically out.

Last month, for example, New York City [signed](#) a \$3 billion, 20-year contract with the waste-to-energy firm Covanta, which will send about 30 percent of city-controlled solid waste to power-generating incinerators as far away as Buffalo. It was a plan the nonpartisan Citizens Budget Commission had [recommended](#) last summer, and a big step in the Bloomberg administration's seven year-old effort to divert 75 percent of New York's garbage from landfills.

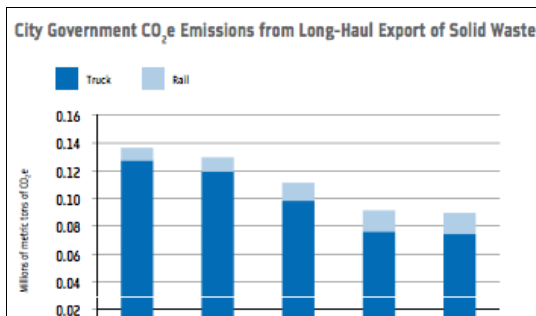
It's also a huge victory for another of Bloomberg's aims: minimizing the role of garbage trucks. Nearly all of the waste handled by Covanta will leave New York on barges and railroads, in keeping with waste disposal goals that may constitute one of the most quietly ambitious legacies of the mayor's tenure. The mayor's [Solid Waste Management Proposal](#), passed in 2006, is fundamentally reshaping the channels of New York City's refuse processing. Trains and boats are in; pneumatic tubes may even be considered; trucks are emphatically out.

The chart at right, from the 2011 [planYC report \[PDF\]](#), illustrates the extent of the city's aims. Long-distance truck hauling is set to be eliminated entirely. The number of garbage truck miles driven inside New York City is set to decrease by 6 million as localized transfer stations handle trash closer to where it's created. The city's waste plan will also cut long-haul truck travel by 55 million miles.

MODE OF TRANSPORT FROM CITY	CURRENT	FUTURE
Rail	32%	41%
City collection truck	23%	12%
Long-haul truck	45%	0%
Barge	0%	47%

Source: NYC Dept. of Sanitation, NYC Mayor's Office

Why is this important? New Yorkers generate more than 14 million tons of waste per year, which is hauled away by 2,000 Department of Sanitation trucks and 4,000 private vehicles. Hundreds of 18-wheelers then drive New York trash into neighboring states — in 2010, half of the city's trash [wound up](#) in Virginia, Ohio, and South Carolina. The overall system creates 1.66 million metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions, about 3 percent of the city's total output. Preliminary shifts from road to rail have already [decreased](#) the greenhouse gas emissions from long-haul export of solid waste by 31 percent. (A gallon of diesel fuel moves a ton of garbage 110 miles on a truck, but 484 miles on a train.)



"It's far better than the current plan," says Steven Cohen, executive director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University. "If you wanted to design an environmentally disastrous way to get rid of garbage, it would be New York's current system."

Of the 11,000 tons of daily solid waste under the authority of the



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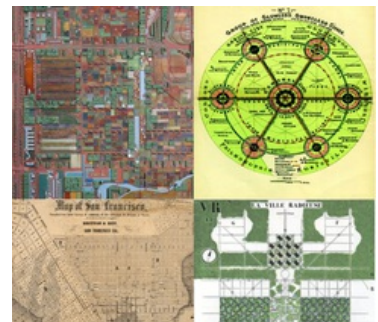
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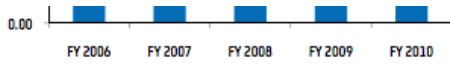
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Department of Sanitation, Covanta will funnel approximately 3,000 tons through two new marine transfer stations in Queens and Manhattan.

Two more marine transfer stations are planned for Brooklyn, further localizing the garbage processing business.

"Particularly the marine transfer system makes a great deal of sense," Cohen says. When completed, these riverside outposts will pack street trash into 18-ton containers, which will be lifted onto barges and sailed to railroad transfer depots. From there, freight trains will roll the city's trash to Covanta facilities near Buffalo and Chester, Pennsylvania.

This is all very new for New York. As recently as the 1990s, all disposable waste collected by the Department of Sanitation was sent (by truck) to the Fresh Kills landfill in Staten Island. When Rudy Giuliani closed Fresh Kills in 2001—it is now on its way to becoming the city's largest park—he left the future of New York's garbage disposal to his successor. As the city scrambled to find replacement sites and make deals with trucking companies, the cost of waste disposal approximately doubled, from \$650 million in 2000 to well over a billion dollars today.



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So part of Bloomberg's challenge was figuring out where to put the stuff. The other part was figuring out how to get it there. Decreasing truck miles—good for the environment, the streets, and the people who walk on the streets—was an obvious goal, but it required more convenient locations to put garbage on barges.

Those new marine transfer stations (one will open in Queens in 2015, another in Manhattan in 2016) have elicited predictable [protests](#) from neighborhood advocates. Others say it's high time New York's garbage processing was geographically distributed: North Brooklyn currently carries much of the burden. It's nothing compared to a Koch administration proposal to build waste-to-energy plants on the waterfront of each borough, reducing the need for long-distance transport all together.

This is progress, sustainability advocates agree, but could things be better? Researchers at the CUNY Transportation Research Center [argue](#) that the city could remove even more trucks from the road by including trash-moving pneumatic tubes in major construction projects like the Second Avenue Subway.

Like barges and trains, that sort of technology is nothing new. Roosevelt Island has used a vacuum system to dispose of garbage for decades. But as the current initiative demonstrates, there's nothing wrong with using 100-year-old technology to solve a few problems.

Top image: [Dmitry Kalinovsky/Shutterstock.com](#)

Keywords: New York, Garbage, disposal, Sustainable, New York, Waste, Trash



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