



50 Broadway, 29th Floor
New York, NY 10004

T 212 631 0886
F 888 370 3085

www.ALIGNny.org

Testimony on Sanitation Policy in NYC: Ideas for the Next Four Years

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Thank you to Chairperson Reynoso and the members of the Sanitation Committee for the opportunity to provide testimony today. ALIGN: the Alliance for a Greater New York is a long-term alliance of worker and community organizations united for a just and sustainable New York.

Firstly, I would like to commend Council Member Reynoso and the members of the Sanitation Committee for calling this hearing to explore long-term policy ideas for sanitation. As most are aware, sanitation, particularly commercial waste, is a troubling problem for our city. New York City's commercial establishments generate a staggering 3.2 million tons of non-construction waste each year. This waste creates problems every step of the way from the trash bin to the landfill.

Our commercial waste leaves most buildings in a single stream that mixes paper, plastic, metal, and food waste. According to a 2012 City study, the commercial recycling rate for paper, glass, plastic and metal is just 16%. Commercial waste is collected by over 4,000 mostly old and dirty waste trucks operating in a "wild west" environment of cut-throat competition and few effective regulations. As a result, waste workers face some of the most dangerous workplace conditions in New York, low wages, and few opportunities for training and advancement. Carting trucks dump trash in transfer facilities primarily sited in low income neighborhoods and communities of color. From there, well over 2 million tons of waste is trucked to landfills and incinerators across the region, generating massive amounts of harmful greenhouse gas emissions.

It doesn't have to be this way. ALIGN and our coalition partners launched the Transform Don't Trash NYC coalition in October 2014 to propose a new path forward through an exclusive franchising system of commercial waste collection. In our coalition report, we demonstrate how this policy approach is a smart way to promote a "race to the top" that will increase diversion from landfills and incinerators, boost recycling and composting, improve truck routing efficiency, and promote safer, living wage jobs. Moreover, by increasing diversion, exclusive franchising is an economic development strategy. According to a recent study by the Tellus Institute, every 25 percent increase in landfill diversion can create up to 5,000 new jobs in recycling-reliant manufacturing. Achieving an 80% commercial diversion rate would eliminate 5 to 7 million tons of greenhouse gas emissions in a single year, the functional equivalent of taking one to 1.5 million cars off the road.

The city of San Jose tripled its commercial recycling rate within six months from 22 to 70 percent after adopting a franchising model. Seattle witnessed similar results and Los Angeles is in the process now of also graduating to an exclusive franchise model.

We believe this is the kind of big, bold policy idea that New York City should pursue alongside leaders in community, labor, and business.

It is very important to note that franchising is consistent with the current Solid Waste Management Plan. Indeed, marine and rail transfer stations will remain vital to handling waste that still needs to be disposed. A franchise system will build upon the relief that capacity reduction legislation, which we support, will provide to overburdened communities by increasing recycling and reducing the amount of commercial waste that needs to be trucked from private transfer stations to landfills and incinerators. Today, almost 75% of the City's solid waste is still processed in the South Bronx, North Brooklyn, and Southeast Queens. We believe that that the City must not lose focus and should keep moving forward on the long-term goals of borough equity in waste handling and sustainable waste management through completing the Manhattan marine and rail facilities and ensuring capacity reduction.

Thank you and we look forward to working productively with the Sanitation Committee, Council, and administration on these important issues.