

Case History: Northern Manhattan: Fair Share or Lion's Share

- **Describe the impacted community (population, neighborhood, general statistics, history, etc).**

Northern Manhattan, home to WE ACT's core constituency, is a densely populated neighborhood with over 600,000 people living in just 7.25 square miles of space. The demographics of the Northern Manhattan community show the highest concentration of both seniors and youth, two of the most vulnerable populations. Forty-four percent (44%) of residents identify as African-American, and 44% as Latino, primarily from the Dominican Republic. The ratio of women to men is 51% to 49%. In 1999 the median income ranged from \$14,896 to \$29,479. WE ACT was founded and incorporated in 1988 as the result of local community struggles around environmental threats and the resulting health disparities created by institutionalized racism and the lack of social and political capital

- **What are/were the problems affecting the community?**

Manhattan is a non-attainment area for clean air standards and ranks #1 in air toxics according to the EPA. Northern Manhattan which has glaring health disparities: #1 in the nation for asthma prevalence and mortality; its neighborhoods rank in the top 15 for new lead poisoning cases; and have high rates of obesity, diabetes, infant mortality, low birth weight, and developmental delays. Northern Manhattan is home to four neighborhoods: East, West and Central Harlem and Washington Heights/Inwood. Though it is 7.25 square miles, it hosts 2 sewage treatment plants that treat most of Manhattan's sewage; was then host to 6 of 8 of Manhattan's diesel bus depots which house 75 % of the buses with Manhattan routes; 5 diesel, garbage truck facilities; the operation of the only 24-hour Marine Transfer Station in Manhattan; and the use of Northern Manhattan communities as New York City's dumping ground for a host of other polluting facilities.

In 2003, the mayor initiated a new plan to overhaul the City's solid waste disposal system – which included the reopening and 300% expansion of the 135th Street Marine Transfer Station (MTS) which would result in 300 trucks entering the community to dump its waste at the MTS and the disproportionate impacts of Manhattan's waste being born by Northern Manhattan's community residents, though communities of color contribute the least to the waste stream.

- **What partnerships were formed to address the problems and challenges?**

WE ACT formed a coalition of 40 community-based organizations, churches, businesses, and elected officials located in Northern Manhattan called the Northern Manhattan EJ Coalition. Also participating were residents involved in WE ACT's organizing campaigns and trainings. Its mission was to initiate and implement a Northern Manhattan community planning process that would result in a just and equitable plan for waste disposal in New York City.

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- **What were the major challenges the community faced or faces in overcoming the problems?**

Challenges included that the plan was (1) endorsed and driven- in some part- by the NYC EJ community which felt that the outer borough communities bore a disparate burden of 40 to 50 stations each in their neighborhoods which contributed to poor air quality and rising asthma rates. There was a value expressed that (2) each borough should bear the burden of its waste and not export to other boroughs but export out of the city by using the marine transfer stations located on waterfronts. The unintended consequence was that in elite Manhattan, an EJ community would bear the brunt. (3) Mainstream environmental groups supported the plan. Most stakeholders did not believe that the plan could succeed without the 135th St. MTS reopening. (4) Many residents did not believe that we could prevail.

- **How did the community overcome the challenges? If the community wasn't able to address the challenges, what were the impacts on the project? How did the project move forward?**

We communicated clearly to all city stakeholders our position and began to educate them about that position. We raised issues of equity and fairness and public health. We said that other communities in Manhattan had to take their share of this burden. We were persistent and consistent, and stayed engaged in all activities related to the solid waste plan not just issues directly affecting us. We had a moral edge because we could demonstrate the burden our community was bearing.

- **What tools or methods did the community use that are transferable to other communities facing similar issues?**

We began by showing support for key parts of the plan, by giving testimony and mobilizing residents to attend public hearings, and by documenting the past and future impacts through video presentations to City Council members, letters and postcards to the mayor and other electeds. We held a community conference to lay out a plan for what constituted a fair system, hosted community trainings, and educated elected officials.

- **What were the major successes in the eyes of the community?**

We won!

In October 2004 the Mayor announced that the 135th Street MTS would not be reopened. The City Council has voted to approve the solid waste plan which calls for reopening an MTS on the elite upper eastside near Gracie Mansion, the mayor's official residence. WE ACT has now received agreement from the city that the 135th St. MTS will revert to a community facility. WE ACT will develop a steering committee with city agencies and community stakeholders to develop a community vision for the 27,000 sq

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ft facility located on a pier at the Hudson River. We envision an environmental education facility, physical fitness gym, and other uses the community will recommend.

Community Leader Bio Sketch: Peggy Shepard is executive director and co-founder of West Harlem Environmental Action, Inc. (WE ACT). Founded in 1988, WE ACT was New York's first environmental justice organization created to improve environmental health and quality of life in communities of color. A recipient of the 10th Annual Heinz Award For the Environment, she is a former Democratic District Leader, who represented West Harlem from 1985 to April 1993, and served as President of the National Women's Political Caucus-Manhattan from 1993-1997. From January 2001-2003, Ms Shepard served as the first female chair of the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC) to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and is co-chair of the Northeast Environmental Justice Network. She is a former member of the National Advisory Environmental Health Sciences Council of the National Institutes of Health and a member of the Environmental Justice Advisory Committee to the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation. Ms. Shepard serves on the Institute of Medicine's committee: Ethics of Housing-Related Health Hazard Research Involving Children, Youth, and Families.

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