

# UPTOWN EYE

Fall 2001

**West Harlem Environmental Action  
WE ACT FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE**

Vol. IV - No. 1

## Waterfront Master Plan Wins \$800,000



### EDC Plan Based on Harlem on the River Community Vision

By Sarah E. Massey

**T**he start of the summer brought good news for the "Harlem on the River" community development plan. On June 26, Governor George E. Pataki announced that the project would receive two grants totaling \$800,000 to further its aim of increasing waterfront access and recreation opportunities along the Hudson River.

"These grants awards will allow the community to take full advantage of the riverfront and the many recreational and cultural opportunities it will provide as a unique destination," said Bernadette Castro, commissioner of the State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.

In January, the New York City Economic

Development Corporation (EDC) announced its commitment to develop a Master Plan for the West 125th Street, Harlem Piers area. The area for the Master Plan will include the City-owned waterfront property between St. Clair Place and West 133rd Street and extends to

*Continued on page 3*

#### SAVE THE DATE

Human Genetics, Environment,  
and Communities of Color: Ethical  
and Social Implications Conference

Monday, February 4, 2002

Columbia University in the  
City of New York

Details on page 8...

## WE ACT Files Discrimination Complaint against the MTA

By Seth Solomonow

**O**n November 15, 2000, West Harlem Environmental Action, Inc. (WE ACT) charged the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) with siting diesel bus depots and parking lots disproportionately in communities of color in Northern Manhattan, according to its racial discrimination complaint filed with the Federal Department of Transportation.

The complaint, filed by WE ACT under Title VI of the Civil Rights

*Continued on page 4*

## From The Editor



**O**n June 26th, Secretary of State Randy A. Daniels and State Commissioner of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation Bernadette Castro came to the Harlem Piers at 125th Street and the Hudson River. They were here on behalf of Governor George Pataki, who pledged his support to the Harlem community in its planning and construction of a West Harlem Waterfront Park. The Governor announced that grants awards totaling \$800,000 would be given to the *Harlem on the*

*River* project to develop open space and waterfront access.

Under the Environmental Bond Act, the state is invested with monies to fund the planning of waterfront parks and open space. WE ACT encouraged the city to apply for these grants, and urged the Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields and Council Member Stanley Michels to contribute city funds to the endeavor.

*Harlem on the River* is a project facilitated by WE ACT in partnership with Manhattan Community Planning Board #9. From its initial execution in 1998, the project has involved the active participation of community residents and stakeholders, local businesses, and government. It is a model that WE ACT would like to see replicated throughout the city.

The *Harlem on the River* community plan arose from several community-wide meetings that mobilized over 200 community residents and stakeholders to participate in a one-day charette (design workshop) aimed at drafting a single community plan for development of the waterfront. A broad-based steering committee ensured consensus, which was confirmed through a community town hall meeting hosted by Columbia University, an active member of the steering committee. Fairway Market, already present on the site, also played a vital and constructive role.

At the same time that the community was beginning its planning, the NYC Economic Development Corp. issued an RFP (request for proposals) for the Harlem Piers waterfront site. Two of the development proposals received called for a 33-story hotel and a 5-story motel. The community thought that those uses were inappropriate and unresponsive to community needs. Through strong advocacy and support by other groups such as the Waterfront Park Coalition and the Hudson River Park Coalition, WE ACT and concerned Harlem residents successfully persuaded EDC not to accept any of the development proposals.

In January 2001, the NYC EDC announced that it would fund a master plan for the Harlem Piers based upon the WEACT/Community Board #9 Community Plan.

WE ACT appreciates the commitment that has been shown by the Governor, as well as Borough President Fields and Council Member Michels.

Hooray for the 200 community residents and stakeholders who worked together over the last two years to draft a plan that is responsive to the needs of our community!

Uptown Eye is a bimonthly, bilingual community publication that focuses on quality of life and issues in communities of color.

Publisher & Editor-in-Chief  
Peggy M. Shepard

Executive Editor  
Nicholas A. Boston

Art Director  
Ed Towles

Translator  
Eduardo Suarez

Contributing Writers  
Paul Killebrew  
Seth Solomonow

Contributing Photographers  
Karl Crutchfield  
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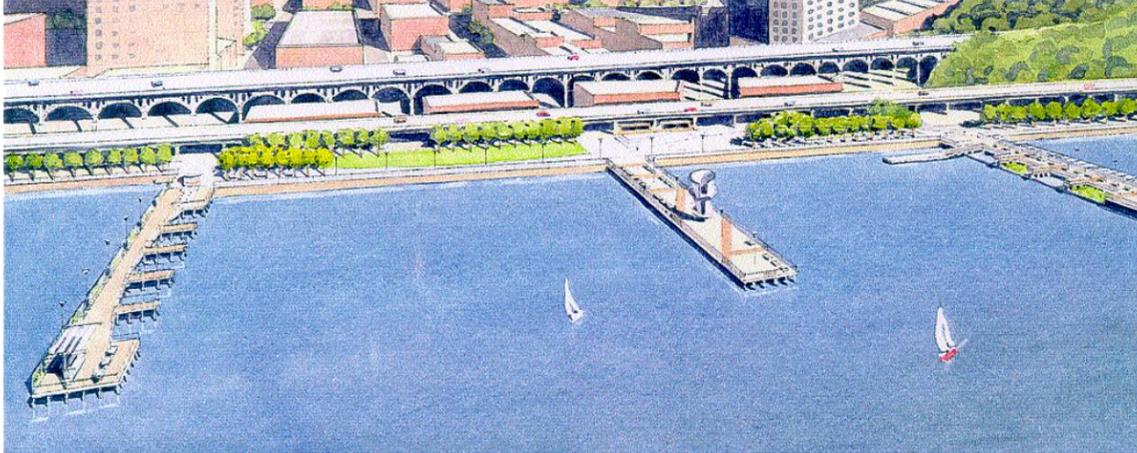
Address correspondence and inquiries to:

Editor, Uptown Eye  
WEACT  
271 West 125th Street, #303  
New York, NY 10027  
Phone: (212) 961-1000  
Fax: (212) 961-1015  
Website: www.weact.org

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## Harlem on the River Community Plan Selected as Benchmark for Harlem Piers Waterfront Development

*Continued from page 1*



135th Street to the north, Old Broadway to the east, St. Clair Place to the south, and the Hudson River to the west. The EDC also pledged to work with local leaders, elected officials, and community members to reflect the community vision for the area. The community-driven plan for the Harlem Piers area, called Harlem on the River, was established through an extensive planning process initiated by West Harlem Environmental Action, Inc. (WE ACT), in collaboration with Community Board 9, community members, businesspeople, local development groups, and elected officials.

“We applaud the EDC for rejecting the inappropriate development proposals for the Harlem Piers waterfront and choosing instead to use the Harlem on the River community plan as a basis for development on the site. Their announcement comes after years of community planning and grassroots organizing to ensure that the Harlem Piers redevelopment is viable and vibrant,” said WE ACT Executive Director Peggy Shepard. “The Harlem on the River plan represents the missing link in the greenway bordering the Hudson River and incorporates green space and economic vitality for the West Harlem community,” said Ms. Shepard.

The Harlem on the River plan features a landscaped park area along the riverfront for passive recreation and a walkway, bikeway and a pier for water-dependent uses (see illus-

trations). The plan also includes connections to Riverside Park to the north and south and restored piers for ferry service and riverfront uses. Community members and leaders realize the need for economic sustainability for the West Harlem area, and the Harlem on the River plan includes economic opportunities, such as a vibrant wholesale and retail marketplace with entertainment, art, and cultural uses. The Fairway supermarket, a long-time favorite of Harlem residents, will remain in its location at Marginal and 133rd Street. The plan proposes to improve traffic and pedestrian circulation patterns to minimize conflicts and increase safety, as well as increasing parking opportunities for all businesses in the area.

“The community-based plan represents an opportunity to provide green space and to return to the piers, and to implement some of the visions of the community, such as an aquatic learning center, a recreational pier, and a fishing pier. Harlem on the River is a wonderful opportunity to continue the link in that emerald necklace that encircles Manhattan island,” said WE ACT Program Director Cecil Corbin-Mark. “A park with connections to existing waterfront parks will be a tremendous value to all the

communities along the Hudson River coastline. Right now, there is a parking lot on the waterfront, where cars are sitting right at the coast and have an opportunity to impact the Hudson River through run off,” said Mr. Corbin-Mark.

Community-based planning for the Harlem Piers site began in earnest in 1998. Led by WE ACT and Community Board 9, a steering committee of community members, businesspeople, and elected officials was created to develop a community plan and to usher it through the EDC’s decision-making processes. These groups participated in numerous design charrettes and public meetings to produce a community vision for the Harlem Piers. The planning process was facilitated by Mitchell Silver, a planner with Abeles Phillips Preiss & Shapiro, Inc. In 2000, WE ACT organized a mailing of thousands of postcards to the Manhattan Borough President and the EDC to stop plans for a tourist hotel and to request that the EDC accept the community vision, which features a park and restaurant. WE ACT has been invited by the EDC to participate in a task force, the Harlem Piers Working Committee, to advise and facilitate the planning and development for the site.

Secretary of State Randy A. Daniels said,



“The West Harlem waterfront has remained underused for decades, despite many large scale plans for the area. Today, the waterfront is poised for redevelopment that will build on the revitalized 125th Street corridor and the recently completed community-based plan for the waterfront... This grant award will help make this vision a reality.”

### Harlem Piers Development Timeline:

**1920’s and 1930’s:**

Harlem Piers were vital transportation hubs of Manhattan island.

**1960’s:**

West Side Drive built, cutting off access to Hudson River to pedestrians.

**1992:**

The Harlem Urban Development Corporation (HUDC) introduced Harlem-on-the-Hudson, which failed.

**1994:**

Harlem Piers area designated as part of the Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone.

**1995:**

Fairway, a wholesale retail market opened a supermarket on Marginal Way and 133rd Street. Fairway subsequently asked the City and was granted temporary use of the waterfront for customer parking, which is the current use of the site.

**1998:**

NYC Economic Development Corporation (EDC) issued a Request for Proposals for development for the Harlem Piers area. The NYC Department of Parks and Recreation constructed “Cherry Walk,” as part of Riverside Park and bikeway along the river’s edge, ending just to the south of the Harlem Piers.

**1998:**

West Harlem Environmental Action, Inc. (WE ACT) received a grant from the U.S. Department of Energy to develop a community-based vision in partnership with Community Board 9 for the Harlem Piers area.

**1999:**

WE ACT and Community Board 9 completed Harlem on the River community-based plan and submitted it to EDC.

**2000:**

EDC reviewed private developer proposals for Harlem Piers. WE ACT and community members advocated for the Harlem

on the River community-based plan.

**2001:**

EDC announces it will not accept private developer proposals. Instead, Harlem on the River plan will be used as benchmark for Harlem Piers Master Plan study and development.

EDC appoints Harlem Piers Task Force to advise on master plan.

Harlem on the River plan receives \$800,000 from State of New York Clean Water, Clean Air Bond Act and Environmental Protection Fund (EPF)

## WE ACT Files Discrimination Complaint against the MTA

*Continued from page 1*

Act, states that the MTA's housing of six of its eight depots in Harlem and Washington Heights constitutes racial discrimination because it exposes minority districts to high levels of diesel exhaust, which is associated with elevated rates of respiratory ailments. WE ACT said that the opening of a new MTA diesel bus parking lot on West 215th Street over the summer triggered its pursuit of Federal intervention to end the proliferation of MTA diesel buses in Northern Manhattan.

Samara Swanston, a civil rights attorney, who co-filed the complaint with civil rights attorney Luke Cole, said that six depots in Northern Manhattan was too much. "Northern Manhattan is asthma ground zero," Swanston said at a press conference at WE ACT's headquarters on 125th Street. Environmental studies show that Northern Manhattan and South Bronx neighborhoods have the highest asthma rates citywide and some of the highest rates in the country. "We believe it's discriminatory because (MTA officials) are spending their money to place a disproportionate burden on low income communities and communities of color in New York City."

The Civil Rights Act bars federal funding for programs that discriminate against people on the basis of race, whether or not the discrimination was intentional. The complaint, which is an alternative to a lawsuit, calls for a moratorium on new depots, improved pollution monitoring and enforcement of current emissions standards, and an investigation by the Federal Department of Transportation with an eye on cutting off the \$5 billion in federal funding that is planned for the MTA over the next four years.

Eric Goldstein, a co-director of the urban program at the Natural Resources Defense Council and WE ACT Boardmember, said the lawsuit "raises some very serious questions as to whether this community, even in the year 2000 is receiving more than its fair share of environmentally undesirable facilities."

Members of WEACT and community lead-



*From left: Peggy Shepard; Samara Swanston, esq.; Councilmember Bill Perkins; Eric Goldstein, senior attorney, NRDC and WEACT board member.*

ers said the complaint comes after years of failed attempts at negotiation with the MTA to relocate depots or lessen the impact of the hundreds of city buses that idle in lots and in streets around depots. David Givens, Chair of Community Board 11, and community residents from Harlem and Washington Heights joined WE ACT in the complaint, testifying to the destructive impacts of the diesel bus depots and diesel bus parking lots on the community.

WE ACT Executive Director Peggy Shepard said that the closing of the MTA's Walnut depot in the Bronx in 1998 has led to 200 more buses being directed to Northern Manhattan. She said that the planned closure of the Hudson bus depot downtown would force the MTA to send more buses uptown to the reconstructed 100th Street depot in East Harlem, and that the MTA isn't converting enough buses to burn cleaner natural gas. "Instead, in the new capital plan, the MTA is committed to buying hundreds more diesel buses," Shepard said.

Shepard said a large part of the air quality problem was the MTA practice of letting parked buses idle through the night along city streets, causing around-the-clock exhaust. "If the mayor wants to create a strong quality of life initiative, he ought to enforce the idling

laws," she said.

Dierdre Parker, a spokeswoman for the MTA said that she had seen a press release announcing the complaint but said, "We don't usually give statements on things that are in litigation."

In April of this year, Millard Seay, senior vice president of MTA New York City Transit's department of buses, said that the New York City Transit's bus fleet accounted for only .2 percent of emissions citywide.

Community leaders responded that that percentage was misleading. "We are faced with an epidemic," said Dennis Derryck, Chair of the WEACT Board of Directors. "You know it's an epidemic when you get into a classroom and it's no longer a crisis if a kid leaves his or her inhaler at home because they can borrow one from anyone in that class," Derryck said.

Harlem Councilmember Bill Perkins said the neighborhood didn't receive equitable treatment. "If this was in any other community, the MTA would not move a step forward, as it is trying to do now," he said. "Maybe there's an assumption that these communities are indifferent, maybe there's an assumption that these communities have less concern or less political influence, but they need to relieve themselves of that assumption."

## The Fight to Stop the 100th Street Bus Depot Continues



WEACT, community members, and local officials have been battling the MTA for over a year on its planned re-opening of the 100th Street diesel bus depot. The 100th Street bus depot is located at 100th Street and Lexington Avenue, in a community that

suffers from some of the highest asthma hospitalization rates in the country. Studies have shown links between diesel smoke and asthma attacks. WE ACT chose to partner with the Coalition to Stop the 100th Street Depot in order to support the community's mission to keep out another diesel depot. Over the year, the Coalition

to Stop the 100th Street Depot held rallies, proposed New York City Council resolutions, and lobbied Governor Pataki.

Unfortunately, MTA bulldozers moved in the summer of 2000 to tear down the old depot for reconstruction, and blasting rat-

tled the neighborhood. The MTA's position is that it needs space for its diesel buses that will be dislocated when the downtown Hudson Depot closes. The MTA also claims that since the project is part of its old capital plan, it cannot change course and make the facility a clean fuel facility. The latest capital plan calls for all new and converted bus depots to be clean fuel depots. The new 100th Street bus depot will be a diesel depot.

Although the MTA has moved ahead in its plans to construct the depot, WEACT has not given up the fight against the polluting facility. WEACT has asked that any MTA mitigation efforts include funding for studies related to the development of asthma and noxious exposures. At a recent MTA, Councilman Phil Reed, and Coalition to Stop the 100th Street Depot town hall meeting, WE ACT garnered support for using MTA money to pay for a study on the impact of the depot. WE ACT also uses opportunities to let the MTA and the Governor know how important clean fuels are to the health of the communities of Northern Manhattan.

## Interview with WE ACT Environmental Health Director Swati Prakash

By Geneva Nelson, summer intern.



Geneva: What is your position at West Harlem Environmental Action?

Swati: I am The Director of Environmental Health and Community Based Research.

Geneva: What is your educational and work background?

Swati: I hold a BA from Harvard University where I studied Environmental Science and Public Policy. I also received my Masters at Harvard's School of Public Health in Environmental Health. I mostly focused on health effects of air pollution. In terms of my work experience, I worked for a small environmental justice group in Boston, and I also worked with the Environmental Protection Agency's Urban Environmental Initiative.

Geneva: What is your sign?

Swati: I am a Leo.

Geneva: What do you like to do on your free time?

Swati: I love to dance, ride my bike, and go camping.

Geneva: Do you have any role models? Who is your role model and why?

Swati: Someone I really admire is my former boss at the Environmental Protection Agency, Lois Adams. She is a role model, because she is a strong woman of color in the environmental field and also a great leader. I would like to be just like her.

Geneva: How did you become an environmentalist?

Swati: Environmental issues always interested me. Probably it started when I was a kid in the Girl Scouts. They got me into camping and hiking. I was in environmental groups in

high school and college.

Geneva: What advice would you give to young people who are interested in careers in environmentalism?

Swati: I would tell them to talk, talk, and talk. My advice is to talk to environmentalists and others to find out the different things that are going on in the world. Young people should go and find out what jobs can be done in the environment and get as much experience as possible.

Geneva: How did you find out about WE ACT?

Swati: I learned about WE ACT in a class in college in which WE ACT was featured in an article.

Geneva: What are your goals with WE ACT? Where do you see WE ACT in a few years?

Swati: I would like to expand the technical and scientific foundations that underline the work of WE ACT, and I would like to expand WE ACT's scope to include participation in international justice networks.

*Geneva Ann Nelson, 16 years old and a resident of Harlem, is currently pursuing her Regents Diploma. Geneva worked with WE ACT in the summer of 2000.*

## WE ACT's Environmental Health Program

Swati Prakash just completed a year as director of environmental health and community-based research programs at WE ACT. Take a look at some of the programs she and WE ACT have been working on.

### NIEHS Environmental Justice Partnerships for Communication

This four-year grant from the National Institutes of Environmental Health Sciences is a continuation to enhance and expand the community-driven research agenda to address environmental justice issues. WE ACT will build on its enormously successful Environmental Health Leadership Training to train community activists throughout the Northeastern

United States. Also, WE ACT will facilitate communication between scientists and community residents, and develop a mentoring program to encourage local high school students to pursue studies in environmental health and health care.

### Lead Hazard Reduction

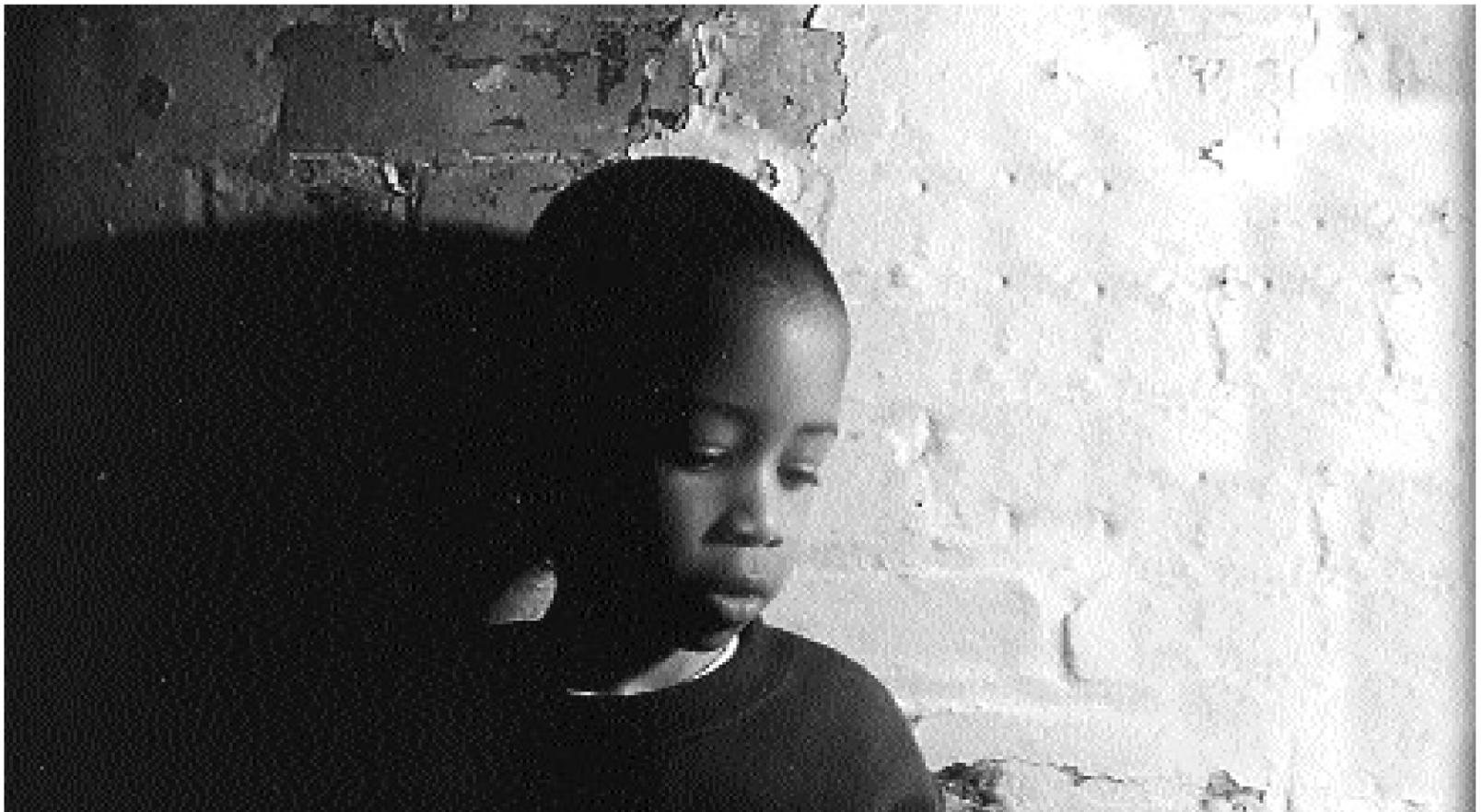
WE ACT received funding from the Department of Housing and Urban Development to increase the awareness of lead poisoning in children under six years of age by informing and educating high risk neighborhoods of Northern Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. Specifically, WE ACT is now providing lead poisoning prevention trainings to day care providers and parents in these targeted communities and working with faith-based groups to help increase awareness

of lead poisoning and how to prevent it.

### Asthma Outreach and Education

WE ACT collaborates with the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University on several research projects related to asthma and indoor air quality. Our latest collaboration is on a study entitled, "Traffic-related particle exposures among New York City adolescents," in which Dr. Pat Kinney is the primary investigator and South Bronx Clean Air Coalition an important partner.

To schedule a FREE training in lead poisoning prevention and/or asthma control, please contact Swati Prakash at 212-961-1000 x.315.



## WE ACT and Columbia University Children's Center Launch "HEALTHY HOME, HEALTHY CHILD campaign"

**R**esidents of Harlem and Washington Heights are disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards, both within the home and out in the neighborhood. Environmental toxins, like diesel exhaust, are found in the air we breathe. We sometimes mistakenly add to them in our homes by using spray pesticides, which are particularly harmful to children.

"Healthy Home, Healthy Child, The Truth about the Environment and How to Make it Safe," is a public education campaign from West Harlem Environmental Action (WE ACT) and the Columbia University Center for Children's Environmental Health (CCCEH) aimed at empowering community members with the knowledge and tools they need to make their environments healthier and safer.

WE ACT and CCCEH structured the bilingual campaign out of information gleaned from focus groups and interviews conducted with local residents about hazards in the environment. During 1999, 557 women of the Washington Heights and Harlem areas were interviewed and 14 focus groups were held to air concerns about the environment.

These interviews and informational sessions identified seven focal topics, which were made into the campaign's themes. They were pests and pesticides; cigarette smoke; lead poisoning; drugs and alcohol; air pollution; garbage; and nutrition.

In June, 2000, the campaign kicked off with street-level distribution of educational materials on the corner of 145th Street and Broadway.

WE ACT staff and volunteers, along with CCCEH researchers and staff, fanned out to distribute information on the first of the seven themes, pests and pesticides. A fact sheet on pest control and integrated pest management, as well as a large spray can-shaped information card were handed out to passers-by. Community members were enthusiastic about the materials and stopped to talk to researchers and WEACT staff about the dangers of pesticides.

"This is a great response," said Dr. Robert Zuber of the Healthy Schools Network. "I've never seen so many people take materials before."

The campaign selected pest control and pesticides as its kick-off theme because of the summertime spraying of pesticides and the attention given at the time to problems of rat infestation throughout the city. WE ACT produced a bilingual fact sheet specifically for summer distribution on how to protect against West Nile Virus, pesticides, and other kinds of toxic exposure. WE ACT's Planet Rock Teen environmental youth group — trained on issues regarding pesticides and pest management — distributed campaign information in the neighborhoods of Central Harlem and Washington Heights throughout July and August.

"I had no idea that pesticides could be

so dangerous," said Clarissa Vargas, a Planet Rock Teen youth group member. "You can inhale sprays into your lungs and you can be poisoned. Sprays are really dangerous for small children."

"What's really gross is that you can inhale the body parts of dead roaches, so it is important to get rid of them. This Healthy Home, Healthy Child campaign gives you the safe way to get rid of pests," said Ms. Vargas.

Cockroaches transmit a variety of digestive tract disorders, including food poisoning, dysentery and diarrhea, and have been linked to the development of childhood asthma and allergies.

Many pesticides used to destroy pests can themselves be toxic to people and can cause serious health problems, such as cancer, reproductive problems, birth defects, and lung and kidney damage. The Healthy Home, Healthy Child campaign therefore outlines integrated pest management (IPM) techniques for discouraging certain behavior of common pests and eliminating them from the home without the use of toxic pesticides.

The Healthy Home, Healthy Child campaign is part of the community outreach arm of the collaboration between Columbia Center for Children's Environmental Health (CCCEH) and WE ACT. CCCEH researchers are working on several projects to identify toxic exposure in community residents and to educate them about what can be done to reduce harmful exposure.

# The Healthy Home, Healthy Child Campaign

## The Truth About the Environment . . . and How to Make it Safe

### Protecting Your Child from Pesticides

#### What is a Pesticide?

- Roach Spray
- Flea and Tick Shampoo
- Rat Poison
- Plants and Garden Spray
- Insect and Wasp Spray
- Dips for Pets
- Repellents and Baits



#### What is the trouble with pesticides?

The same chemicals that make pesticides effective in killing roaches and rodents often make them toxic to people. Children are especially vulnerable to the effects of pesticides because their developing bodies are less able to defend against the effects of toxic chemicals. They are also curious and do not know that these products are poisonous. Pesticides are also applied to fruits and vegetables, so make sure you wash them thoroughly before giving them to children. Common household pesticides include:

#### Avoid Purchasing Pesticides at Dollar Stores

Pesticides containing chlorpyrifos are especially dangerous to young children and should be avoided. Never purchase roach and rat poisons sold at dollar stores, such as Dursban and Tres Pasos. They are unregulated products that may be even more harmful than approved products.

#### Use Safer Alternatives to Pesticides

There is no easy answer to pest problems, but pesticides are not the only solution. If you want to reduce your child's exposure to pesticides and reduce the number of pests in your home you can try some Integrated Pest Management (IPM) strategies. IPM uses information about the behavior of pests to control them. Please refer to the five-step IPM included here.

### THE FIVE-STEP INTEGRATED PEST MANAGEMENT PLAN

#### STEP 1: Survey Your Apartment

Have a look around your home to figure out how roaches are getting in. Look for small cracks and spaces behind the fridge and under the sink.

#### STEP 2: Block Access Point

Block pest's point of entry into your apartment by using copper mesh, sealing caulk or duct tape as a temporary solution. Report holes and cracks to your landlord for repair.

Concentrate on hot spots such as the kitchen and bathroom. Repair torn window screens.

#### STEP 3: Cut Off Food & Water Supply

Keep garbage containers clean and take garbage out nightly. Store food in glass jars and plastic tubs with tight lids to deny roaches access to food. If possible repair leaky faucets which provide roaches with access to water.

#### STEP 4: Use Safer Pesticides

If you continue to see roaches, you can use boric acid because it is a "safer"

pesticide. Apply a very thin layer to surfaces where you see roaches. Boric acid is toxic and it can be harmful if inhaled or eaten so make sure it is kept out of the reach of children.

Use snap traps and glue boards placed out of the reach of children to catch rats & mice.

#### STEP 5: The Last Resort

**IF THESE METHODS DO NOT WORK AND YOU NEED TO USE PESTICIDES, PROTECT YOURSELF AND YOUR CHILDREN BY TAKING THE FOLLOWING STEPS:**

Store pesticides and other household chemicals including chlorine bleach and kitchen and bathroom disinfectants in locked cabinets out of the reach of children.

Never transfer pesticides to containers that children may associate with food or drink (for example: soda bottles).

Use gel baits to avoid using sprays and fogs that can linger in the air and be inhaled by children.

Before using a pesticide remove children and their toys (as well as pets) from the area.

Developed by:

The Columbia Center for Children's Environmental Health (CCCEH), Community Partner, West Harlem Environmental Action (WE ACT)

## Columbia Center for Children's Environmental Health Reports Early Research Results

*Frederica Perera, Dr. P.H.  
Director, Columbia Center for  
Children's Environmental Health*

Children living in the communities of Harlem, Washington Heights, and the South Bronx face health threats such as high rates of childhood asthma, low birth weight, and problems with proper growth and development. Childhood cancer, with an estimated 8,400 new cases each year nationwide, is also a serious problem. Although we do not fully understand the complex causes of these diseases, we believe that environmental pollutants play an important role. These include air pollutants from cars, trucks, and buses, secondhand cigarette smoke, pesticides, lead, and chemicals such as polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and mercury. Allergens (the things people are allergic to) found in the home, such as cockroaches, rodents, or mold, can also be a problem for people with asthma. Because they are developing rapidly, fetuses and young children are more vulnerable than adults to the effects of these toxins.

In response to these serious health problems, last year researchers at the Columbia School of Public Health formed a partnership with WEACT and other community leaders in Northern Manhattan and the South Bronx to learn how environmental exposures during pregnancy and the first years of life may be affecting children's health. The Center is enrolling nearly 600 nonsmoking pregnant women in a 5-year study. This study will measure the environmental contaminants that the women and their children are exposed to

both during and after pregnancy. It will also look for signs of the environmental contaminants in samples of blood and urine of the mother and child. The growth and development and respiratory health of children will be assessed to see whether any problems that are found are associated with environmental exposures. The Center is also testing an intervention to reduce the risk of asthma among children in the study.

As a community advisor and partner, WEACT helps guide the research efforts of the Center, and WE ACT collaborates on the community outreach campaign Healthy Home, Healthy Child.

### Preliminary findings of the Center's research are:

1. Almost all mothers in the study have been exposed to various levels of air pollutants, environmental tobacco smoke, allergens, and pesticides. (Kinney et al. Exposure Core)

2. Even before they are born, children can develop sensitivity to many different allergens found indoors. For example, 55% of newborns showed allergic sensitization to cockroach allergen, even before they went home from the hospital. (Miller et al.)

3. 40% of babies in the study showed signs of respiratory problems by age 3 months. (Meyer et al.)

Through this interdisciplinary research, CCCEH investigators hope to uncover the relationships between environmental exposures — both before and after birth — and children's risk of developing asthma, developmental disorders, and cancer. With this knowledge we can work to help prevent these serious illnesses. At the same time, the Center and WE ACT has launched the community-wide educational campaign to raise awareness about known environmental threats to children's health and what parents can do to keep children safe.

## WE ACT Hosts Clean Fuel Vehicles Workshop



*From left to right: Chris Hardej, New York Metropolitan Transport Council; Peggy Shepard, WE ACT; C. Virginia Fields, Manhattan Borough President; Ira S. Rubenstein, Environmental Business Association of New York State.*

On May 4, 2001, WE ACT hosted a Clean Fuel Vehicles Workshop at City College. The objective was to provide information about alternative fuel vehicles to private and municipal fleet operators in and around the Northern Manhattan area. It was also to inform them about the availability of federal money for the conversion of their fleets to alternative fuel use. The workshop featured presentations from vehicle manufacturers, fuel suppliers, and agency officials, and showcased various alternative fuel cars, vans, trucks and buses currently available or soon to be released on the market.

In partnership with the Department of Energy's project called Clean Cities, WE ACT promotes the use of cleaner exhaust technologies and alternative fuels. Alternative fuels can be electricity, compressed natural gas, and other resources that produce less pollutants than dirty, unhealthy diesel fuel.

"Diesel exhaust and air pollution trigger asthma attacks and contribute to poor quality of life in our communities," said Peggy Shepard, Executive Director of West Harlem Environmental Action, Inc. (WE ACT). "Our workshop's goal is to get fleet owners to begin thinking about their contribution to air pollution and how they may convert their fleets to clean vehicles. Over one third of air pollution in the region is caused by motor vehicles. We have pushed for government agencies, like the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, to change their polluting practices, and now we are working to educate and encourage private businesses," said Ms. Shepard about the clean fuels workshop.

The workshop was jointly sponsored with Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields; Con Edison; U.S. Department of Energy; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency - Region 2; local City Council Members; and local community boards and business associations. It was hosted by the University Transportation Research Center - Region 2. This event was the third in a series of New York City, community-sponsored meetings to reduce air pollution in environmental justice communities.

If you know of a business that is a good candidate for conversion or a business that is parking trucks or buses in your neighborhood, or for more information on the alternative fuels project, please contact Nicholas Boston, WE ACT Communications Director, at (212) 961-1000 x 304.

Please visit the Clean Cities website at <http://www.ccities.doe.gov>.

### ***Human Genetics, Environment, & Communities of Color: Ethical and Social Implications***

***Monday, February 4, 2002***

***Alfred Lerner Hall (114th St. & Broadway)***

***Columbia University in the City of New York***

In June 2000, scientists announced that they had "decoded" the human genome — the collective genetic make-up of human beings. This achievement has been called one of the major scientific breakthroughs in recent history, with the potential to usher in a new era of human health protection. However, many concerns have been raised about the potential for misuse of this technological breakthrough and the exploitation of particular populations. How will genetics research impact on communities of color, and how can we best inform and prepare ourselves to handle both the opportunities and challenges posed by this new knowledge?

Human Genetics, Environment, & Communities of Color: Ethical and Social Implications is a national conference to create a unique forum for dialogue among community advocates, policy makers, and scientists from across the country. Conference

participants can expect to increase their knowledge about the science upon which genetics research is based, and to participate in discussions around the ethical, legal, and social implications of human genetics for communities and people of color and for environmental justice.

Sponsored by WEACT and the NIEHS Center for Environmental Health in Northern Manhattan.

There will also be a 2-hour pre-conference session, "Genetics 101," held on the evening of February 3rd, which will review the science of genetics in plain English. Please contact us if you are interested in attending this free event.

***For more information or to contact us, call 212-961-1000 x.333, visit our web page at [www.weact.org](http://www.weact.org), or email [conference@weact.org](mailto:conference@weact.org).***

# Do We Need East River Plaza?

by Paul Killebrew



The old, run-down building that now sits on FDR Drive between 116th and 119th Streets in El Barrio used to be the Washburn Wire Factory, but that was years ago. It is empty, abandoned, and several groups have their own plans for the now-valuable land.

One of these groups is Home Depot, which would like to tear down the old factory and build East River Plaza. The proposed plaza would house one of their stores, along with a Costco and a 1248-car parking lot. Some people in the community like the idea of living near to Home Depot and Costco. Jose B. Rivera, formally of Community Board 11, said, "East River Plaza will be good for the community... My wife cannot wait to shop there!"

Other members of the community are worried, though, about what East River Plaza will bring besides cheaper products. Graciano Matos, of the South Bronx Clean Air Coalition, cited an environmental impact statement that suggested an increase of traffic by 5,000 more cars a day, not to mention the 18-wheeler trucks going in and out of East River Plaza 24 hours a day. "Within a six block radius of East River Plaza, there are four or five schools, several housing developments, and all of those people would have to deal with the added strain of more traffic, more noise, and more pollution."

Air pollution is a significant factor in this debate. The area around the Washburn Wire Factory already has the highest rate of hospitalizations for asthma in the country, and many believe that poor air quality is a contributor. Five thousand more cars daily certainly would not make the air any cleaner. Peggy Shepard, Executive Director of WE ACT, said, "You have to weigh the full cost of a project like East River Plaza. With more cars and trucks in the area, you will have more emergency room visits, more hospitalizations, and more school days lost. Can our community afford that reality?"

Something that has made some residents less concerned about pollution has been the promise of jobs that East River Plaza represents. "[East River Plaza] will allow more of our residents to be employed, to have a career ladder to move up," said Mr. Rivera. "But," responds Mr. Matos, "they would also take a lot of jobs out." What Matos refers to is the possibility of Home Depot's driving out smaller, locally owned hardware and construction supply stores, and Costco doing the same to the area's bodegas.

Ms. Shepard added, "What we have to understand about the jobs that would be created by Home Depot and Costco is that they are low-skill jobs, many of them without benefits. There are other retailers that can provide those jobs without the dependence on cars and truck deliveries." Ms. Shepard also noted the inevitable change in neighborhood character that would occur with the addition of East River Plaza. "Small, residential streets would become wide thoroughfares for 18-wheelers and shoppers from all five boroughs."

Urban planner Sarah Massey noted that this site may not be the best place for a project like East River Plaza. "El Barrio is being forced to accept poor air quality in exchange for jobs, and that is not fair. There are plenty of other possibilities for this site that would be less dangerous environmentally, and less threatening to neighborhood character. Why not a bookstore, some desperately-needed housing, or a community college?"

Right now, East River Plaza is being stalled as the developers look for public money to pay for the 1248-car parking structure. In the time being, concerned residents can call WEACT at 961-1000, Councilmember

Philip Reed at 828-9800, or attend Community Board 11 meetings.

"This project is a great achievement for the East Harlem community, and further evidence of the importance of business-oriented economic development," said Secretary of State Randy A. Daniels. "As we in Harlem continue to flex our economic muscles, demonstrating both our power as consumers and producers, we build on the great success we have had in recent years, creating a better community for everyone who lives, works and shops here."

*Paul Killebrew is currently completing his BA at the University of Georgia at Athens. Paul volunteered as an intern at WE ACT in the summer of 2000.*



# IN BRIEF

## SEEDS OF THE COMMUNITY

The New York City Council is currently sitting on two resolutions that would protect the City's 400 endangered community gardens. Intro No 742 and 743 would place the administration of the community gardens back under the Green Thumb Program, overseen by the city Department of Parks and Recreation. Once the Parks Department has control, it will be up to the new mayor and parks commissioner, with consultation and advice from community gardeners and environmental advocates, to develop and implement a program which makes the community gardens permanent green spaces. Urge your NYC Councilmember to pass Intro No 742 and 743. Contact your state representatives, especially those in NYC, urging their support for the protection of community gardens. Call the More Gardens! Coalition at 212-533-8019 or visit [www.voteforgardens.org](http://www.voteforgardens.org)

## CHILL FACTOR

The Bush Administration has proposed weakening new air conditioner efficiency standards. The Department of Energy's (DOE) announced rollback would increase peak electricity demand, increase total electricity consumption by US households, raise electricity bills and increase greenhouse emissions and other types of power plant pollution. IN June, state attorneys general of NY, Connecticut, and California joined the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Consumer Federation of American and the Public Utility Law Project in filing suit against the DOE to challenge the delays and the attempt to roll back the energy efficiency rule. Call 202-586-6210 or email: [The.Secretary@hq.doe.gov](mailto:The.Secretary@hq.doe.gov) to tell DOE Secretary Spenser Abraham to reverse the rollback on air conditioner energy efficiency standards that will hurt air quality, public health, and consumers. For more information, contact Andrew deLaski, Appliance

Standards Awareness Project, at 617-363-9470, or visit [www.standardsasap.org](http://www.standardsasap.org)

## SCHOOL DAZE

The end of summer means more than new books and backpacks for New York's students. It also means a new right-to-know about pesticide use. The state's new pesticide Neighbor Notification Law, enacted in 2000, gives all parents and guardians the right to advance warning before pesticides are applied to their

child's school buildings and grounds. Look for a notice from the school that will enable you to sign up for this advance warning. And three times each year, all parents and guardians will also receive a complete list of pesticides that have been applied. For more information, or if you receive such notice and want to find out what your school could be doing to manage its pest problems without pesticides, contact Audrey Thier at EA at 518-462-5526, ext. 236.

## WE ACT Kicks Off Community Agenda For Healthier Schools

Last January, WE ACT and the Healthy Schools Network, Inc. held a working breakfast meeting focused on creating a community agenda for environmental conditions in Northern Manhattan schools.

The purpose of the breakfast was to inform parents, schoolboard members and advocates about the conditions in our schools and to solicit input on an agenda for change to protect our children.

The meeting, hosted by MetLife Harlem, featured Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields and Council Members Bill Perkins and Phil Reed.

Panelists included Jill Chaifetz, execu-



*From left: Peggy Shepard, WE ACT; Claire Barnett, Healthy Schools Network; Jill Chaifetz, Advocates for Children; C. Virginia Fields, Manhattan Borough President.*

tive director, Advocates for Children; Claire Barnett, founder and executive director, Healthy Schools Network, Inc.; and Peggy Shepard, executive director, WE ACT.

## WE ACT guest edits special issue of Environmental Health Perspectives

WE ACT continues our tradition of promoting community-based research by serving as the first grassroots organization ever to guest edit a supplemental issue of the peer-reviewed academic journal Environmental Health Perspectives (EHP). The theme of the issue, or monograph, is "Using Community-Based Participatory Research to Advance Environmental Justice." It will feature research articles on the results of community-based participatory research in low-income communities and communities of color. WE ACT shares its duties as guest editor with Mary Northridge and Gabriel Stover of the Harlem Health Promotion Center. The monograph will be an important means of documenting to the scientific community the success and importance of community-based research as a means of promoting environmental justice and community health.

EHP publishes 4 supplemental issues per year. Each issue covers a narrowly focused and timely scientific topic.

The anticipated publication date for the monograph is April 2002. Additionally, WE ACT will be guest editing a parallel publication, dedicated to the same theme but intended for a wider readership. This special publication will feature many of the research articles published in the EHP supplement, rewritten for a no-scientific audience, as well as articles and essays written by environmental justice advocates. The publication will be released in October, 2002 at the Second National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C..

WE ACT thanks MetLife Financial Services Center

At 203-07 West 125th Street for its generous support in hosting the community breakfast, "Creating a Community Agenda for Upper Manhattan Schools."

For more information on services and programs available, please call (212) 961-0311.