



ON THE CITY By ERROL LOUIS

MTA's choke hold

Pols must step in to curb unhealthy uptown bus depots

A City Council hearing scheduled to take place in Harlem tomorrow will shine a spotlight on a health crisis that should have been fixed a long time ago: the MTA's concentration of bus depots north of 96th St. Harlem's elected officials, who collectively possess a formidable amount of seniority and clout, need to spend some of that political capital to rid uptown of the pollution that is literally killing their constituents.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority has seven bus barns in Manhattan, depots where vehicles get parked, fixed, fueled and relaunched every day. The diesel-powered buses that line up in and around the depots pump out smog day and night.

All but one of the depots are north of 96th St., and house more than 1,300 buses — about one-third of the entire city fleet of 4,200. This overconcentration of vehicles contributes to the sky-high rates of asthma uptown. In 2003, researchers were startled to find that one in four kids in central Harlem had asthma — the highest rate in America.

Community and environmental groups have rightly protested this state of affairs for years. One local organization, West Harlem Environmental Action (WE ACT), even sued the MTA for environmental racism in 2000. The charge of deliberate discrimination was thrown out, but the transit agency agreed to make changes uptown — promises that WE ACT Executive Director Peggy Shepard says haven't been kept. "After two years of discussion, things have been downgraded from agreement to 'we'll see if it's feasible,'" says Shepard. "There's no meat here. What we need to do is go to our



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Peggy Shepard wants MTA to keep its promise.

elected officials and start over."

All of which brings us to the bus depot at W. 133rd St. and 12th Ave. Years ago, the MTA promised to convert the facility to handle low-pollution buses that run on cleaner-burning compressed natural gas.

But Shepard says the MTA never made good on its promise, citing the cost of installing natural gas fuel tanks and other equipment in the location, and now says it prefers to use less costly new technology, such as hybrid diesel-electric buses that spew less pollution.

But cleaner-running buses are only a partial solution. WE ACT is pressing a bunch of sensible additional demands, including the permanent closure of one depot, the mandatory use of hybrid vehicles at all uptown sites, and the relocation of depots from uptown to elsewhere in the city.

City Councilman John Liu, the chairman of the Council's Transportation Committee, says tomorrow's hearing — at 10 a.m. at the Harlem State Office Building on W. 125th St. — will spotlight the MTA's foot-dragging.

"This is one more example of the MTA's lack of accountability," says Liu. "It can have deadly consequences."

Liu needs backing from the crowd of uptown pols. They currently have more political juice than at any time since the days of the late Adam Clayton Powell Jr., the legendary congressman — and it's long since time they used it.

Harlem Rep. Charles Rangel is the dean of the state's congressional delegation and first in line to become chairman of the powerful Ways and Means Committee if the Democrats get control of the House of Representatives in next month's elections. Harlem Assemblyman Denny Farrell does triple duty as chairman of the Manhattan Democrats, the state Democratic Party and the Assembly's Ways and Means Committee.

And state Sen. David Paterson is a shoo-in to become the next lieutenant governor. Together, these pols wield enough power to threaten funding for the MTA and force the agency to do what it should have done long ago: clean up, relocate or shut down the bus depots that are literally suffocating Harlem's children.

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