

Opinion

Mayor De Blasio Needs a Clearer Focus on Climate Change, with a More Aggressive Agenda

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(photo: Ed Reed/Mayoral Photography Office)

Mayor de Blasio plans to travel nationally to discuss the ideas in his recent State of the City speech, but if he does, he won't be talking about climate change, because his speech didn't deal with it. He mentioned divesting \$5 billion from fossil fuel stocks, but he never uttered the words "climate change" and said nothing about how New York City is progressing toward key goals for reducing its own climate impacts.

The omission speaks volumes. De Blasio previously pledged the city would cut overall greenhouse gas emissions 80% by 2050 (including cutting city fleet emissions 80% by 2035), and stop 90% of our waste from going to landfills by 2030. He should be held accountable. Both goals are crucial for fighting climate change, and New York should lead the country and the world in implementing them. Instead, we're lagging. Of 27 megacities worldwide, New York uses the most energy and generates by far the most solid waste.

How we handle our waste affects our emissions. Thirty percent of our waste stream is organic waste, 2 million tons of which rot in landfills each year, emitting more than 60,000 tons of methane, a greenhouse gas 25 times more powerful than carbon dioxide. To prevent that, in 2013 de Blasio pledged a mandatory

organic waste collection program within five years. It hasn't materialized. We're stuck with a limited, voluntary program that the Sanitation Department recently delayed expanding.

This pulls a big punch in the fight against climate change, because our organic waste stream -- including the 1.2 million tons of food waste we generate annually and municipal wastewater from our 14 treatment plants -- is not only a source of climate pollution; it's also a massive renewable energy resource. Methane from decomposing organics can be captured and refined into ultra-low-carbon renewable natural gas (RNG).

As a transportation fuel, over its lifecycle RNG is net carbon-negative, meaning it prevents more GHG from getting into the atmosphere than it emits. Producing it captures more greenhouse gases (that would otherwise escape) than are emitted by the buses and trucks using it. These cleaner buses and trucks displace more carbon-intensive diesel-fueled vehicles.

Sacramento, Portland, Toronto, and other cities collect their organic waste and process its gases into RNG, which fuels their municipal vehicle fleets. Nationwide about 30,000 buses and trucks run on RNG.

New York's should, too. Getting city trucks and buses off diesel and onto RNG would vault us toward the mayor's goals of cutting city fleet emissions 80% by 2035, and making New York's air the cleanest of any major U.S. city by 2030.

Diesel exhaust aggravates our sky-high asthma rates, afflicting over 13% of our youth -- more in low-income neighborhoods where truck and bus depots are located. Natural gas buses and trucks with "near zero" engines running on RNG would cut health-damaging nitrogen oxide and particulate pollution to almost nothing.

RNG is available in New York City via pipeline, and we could also tap our organic waste to produce it locally. Using it would save the city money over the service life of vehicles compared with "renewable diesel" or other alternatives.

So what's stopping us? New York City fleet agencies are resisting change and sticking with diesel. Rather than buying natural gas trucks and buses and fueling them with RNG, they're buying diesel vehicles and experimenting with "renewable diesel," which has climate and air quality properties inferior to RNG's. They argue RNG trucks are slow to refuel and can't plow snow, or that it would be better to migrate to electric vehicles.

Those are excuses. RNG trucks are plenty powerful. Stations carrying RNG stand ready to fuel city vehicles now. Heavy-duty electric vehicles are years from service-ready and prohibitively expensive, and their emissions are only as good as the energy source charging the batteries -- mostly fossil fuels.

The real obstacles to adopting RNG in New York are the same ones that kept the State of the City speech weak on climate change: lack of focused leadership and a preference for symbolic gestures over accountability for achieving concrete goals.

The climate can't afford that. The city already has over 1,000 natural gas vehicles, including buses, trucks, and vans, that could start running on RNG tomorrow, simply by taking out a new fuel procurement contract. That would be a welcome first step toward fleet sustainability. The logical destination is to stop buying dirty, outmoded diesel vehicles.

Last year, concerned City Council members sent letters urging the mayor and the MTA's New York City Transit to show environmental leadership by adopting RNG. If they don't, the Council has power through legislative and budget processes to make city agencies get started. It's time to use it.

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