

A City Neighborhood's Toxic Specter

BY STACEY MORRISON

A fatally toxic industrial accident could happen in Greenpoint-Williamsburg, warns a recent two-year study by the Community Environmental Health Center (CEHC) at Hunter College. The report cites the storage of enormous amounts of fuel or extremely hazardous substances, including radioactive waste, within a few yards of homes and businesses. In the wake of two catastrophic fuel accidents—the Con Edison Bronx explosion and the Exxon oil spill in Staten Island—the hazards in that Brooklyn community call for immediate attention, say researchers.

The study was launched after the 1984 toxic chemical accident in Bhopal, India, which killed 2500 people. "Could an accident like that happen in New York City? Could it happen on a smaller scale?" said Carol Steinsapir of CEHC, who directed the research. "We didn't think it would have to kill 2500 people... to be a major tragedy. Our interest in this was encouraging steps that government, industry, and community people can take to prevent accidents. We think that accidents can be prevented."

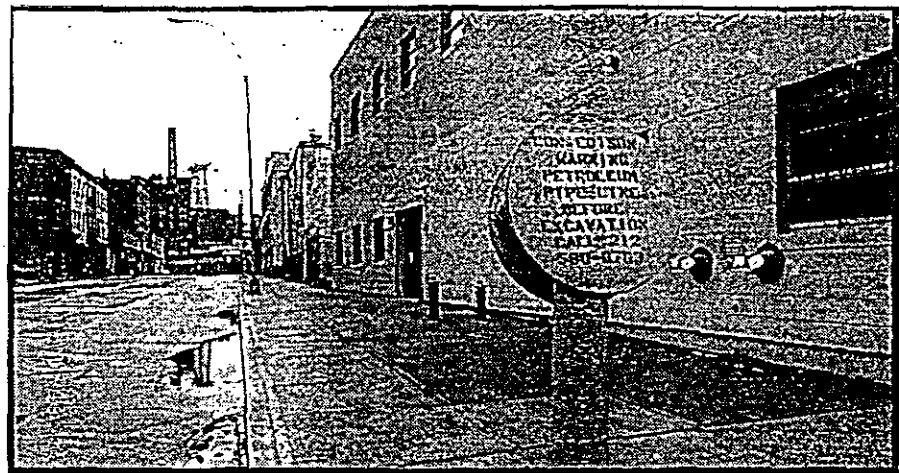
The report, titled "Hazardous Neighbors? Living Next Door to Industry in Greenpoint-Williamsburg," cites 11 facilities in the neighborhood as priorities for investigation because they store one or more of the extremely hazardous substances identified by the federal Environmental Protection Agency. Chemicals on this EPA list can debilitate or kill in the event of a spill or release into the air. The

Hunter research details the nature of the chemicals, how much can kill a person, the track record of the company, and the laws regulating their use and storage. "You want to reduce the potential for accidents and for disastrous consequences," explained Steinsapir, "so if you reduce the amount of toxic or hazardous substances being stored you may reduce the consequences of an accident."

The CEHC study reveals that 109 million gallons of oil, gasoline and liquid natural gas are being stored in 16 locations, many close to each other or near potentially dangerous industry. "This extraordinary concentration of flammable and explosive materials is a potential threat to community safety," the report states.

The neighborhood's largest fuel distributor, Con Edison at 214 Kent Avenue, stores 31 million gallons of fuel oil in one underground and six above-ground tanks. Though rupture of an above-ground tank is highly unlikely, it presents a definite fire hazard, according to the CEHC report. Con Edison spokesman Martin Gitten disagreed, saying that in event of an oil fire, "It's unlikely to explode and you might have a lot of smoke but you wouldn't have the pressure [of the large Bronx gas main] and certainly you'd have something burning but in a controlled area." He would not say where other high-pressure gas mains like the one in the Bronx are located.

Just four blocks from the Con Ed facility is Radiac Research Corporation. Radiac temporarily stores and then trans-



Con Ed stores millions of gallons of fuels in Williamsburg-Greenpoint

ports containers of low-level radioactive waste from hospitals and laboratories. Radiac is the only radioactive waste storage facility in New York City. It is located a block from P.S. 84. Next door, at 33 South First Street, Radiac stores flammable, corrosive toxic compounds including five on the EPA's extremely hazardous substance list. Only a fire door separates the two buildings.

Both Radiac and Brooklyn Union Gas's liquid natural gas tanks, also in Greenpoint, lack buffer zones separating them from residential areas that are now required by zoning regulations for new facilities. The tanks are potentially the most dangerous stored substance in the area. In the very unlikely event of a release of gas from the Brooklyn Union Gas tanks or pipelines, the highly pressured gas would travel a considerable distance, through the nearby residential area, before dissipating. If ignited it could burn everything in its path.

"There may be questions about how much [gas] needs to be stored... and is this an appropriate location to store," said Steinsapir. "Couldn't you store it in a more remote place and pipe it in? To the extent that the facilities are already there, then it is especially critical they

have top-notch safety procedures. It would behoove the community to find out whether they do." Her researchers did not conduct on-site inspections.

William M. Feehan, Chief of Operations for the Fire Department, doesn't seem worried about the fuel hazards residing in Williamsburg. "We're confident with the extinguishing systems that are in place in these facilities, with the inspection procedures we have to insure the systems operate properly, the training that the local companies do, and with the pre-fire planning that we do, that we could safely contain these fires," he said.

But Brooklyn City Councilman Victor Robles, representing Williamsburg, was not so confident. "Can what happened in the Bronx happen in Brooklyn? Absolutely." He added that "blame must be across the board" including state and city agencies and elected officials, both past and present. Luis Garden Acosta of the community organization El Puente, is also disturbed by the threats posed by hazardous fuels and wastes in a dense residential area. He has been active in a local fight to force Radiac to relocate away from residential neighborhoods. Said Garden Acosta, "This area is an environmental wasteland."