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OPINION

Smithtown vs. OPEC

By Joanna D. Underwood

SOME may think Smithtown an unlikely pioneer in a major technology revolution. But last month, leaders of this community of 116,000 made a historic decision: by January, all refuse trucks serving the town must be powered by natural gas instead of diesel fuel. Smithtown is the first community on the East Coast to do this, and, if we're lucky, other cities will follow its lead.

Why should communities buy new, different and seemingly more expensive refuse trucks? The big heavy diesel trucks, providing an essential service, rumble down residential streets nationwide largely ignored by citizens (unless, of course, they don't pick up the trash on time). But recent research conducted by Inform, under my leadership, shows that we can't afford to ignore them anymore.

The more than 136,000 refuse trucks on American roadways are major polluters, emitting exhaust that contains soot, smog-forming nitrogen oxides and a variety of carcinogens onto every doorstep. These vehicles are one of the main reasons that at least 160 million Americans live in areas where the air quality violates health standards set by the United States Environmental Protection Agency, and that there are alarming rates of upper respiratory illnesses, especially among children and the elderly.

At a time when United States reliance on foreign oil is a front-page concern, these trucks also consume huge amounts of petroleum-based

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diesel fuel. Averaging only 2.8 miles per gallon, each truck burns about 8,600 gallons of diesel fuel a year. As world competition increases for dwindling supplies of oil, our country could soon face not only price spikes but also supply disruptions that affect both the cost and the reliability of urban services.

Fortunately, there's some good news. The huge polluting diesel fleets could become much cleaner and largely independent of foreign oil were they powered by natural gas.

Taking the lead in natural gas trucks.

While more than 62 percent of the oil we use is imported (much of it from unstable parts of the world), 97 percent of the natural gas is produced in North America. And while all new heavy-duty vehicles will be getting cleaner beginning next year because of more stringent federal emissions standards, natural gas engines will still produce only one-sixth of the nitrogen oxides of comparable diesel engines.

As a bonus, natural gas trucks are much quieter than diesel trucks and produce fewer greenhouse gases. Use of these cleaner, quieter trucks not only safeguards the health and quality of life in our communities but it also protects sanitation workers who breathe truck fumes day after day.

Use of natural gas trucks also lays the groundwork for a longer-term shift to trucks powered by renewable pollution-free hydrogen. Natural gas is the pathway to the hydrogen era

because of the many similarities between the two gaseous fuels and the technologies needed to use them. And when hydrogen trucks finally become available, the fleets operating natural gas trucks will be poised to make that shift. Natural gas (which is 80 percent hydrogen) will probably be the primary source of hydrogen for vehicles until hydrogen made from water using renewable energy becomes affordable and provides a fully sustainable solution.

From 2002 to 2005, the number of communities in the United States operating natural gas trucks doubled to 57 from 26, and the number of trucks expanded to almost 1,500 from 750. California, the leader in embracing this technology, is home to the country's five-largest fleets. New York, Texas and the District of Columbia are a distant second, third and fourth.

But in 2005, Congress enacted legislation providing financial incentives to buy and use alternative fuel vehicles, including natural gas trucks, and Albany just put in place significant additional state incentives. So 2006 is the year when other states and communities — especially here in New York — have a great reason to get on board. The new incentives will largely cover the higher initial costs of buying and building refueling equipment for natural gas trucks and will ensure an important price advantage for natural gas fuel.

Smithtown's supervisor estimates that over the seven-year life of the town's new contract, the 30 or so natural gas trucks will give Smithtown residents cleaner air, reduced costs and eliminate the need for more than 2.5 million gallons of petroleum. This alone will not bring OPEC to its knees, but if Smithtown becomes a model for the rest of the East Coast, who knows how broad its impact might be. □