Good afternoon, my name is Melissa Iachan, and I am a Senior Staff Attorney in the Environmental Justice Program at New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (“NYLPI”). NYLPI’s environmental justice program has worked with communities who have shouldered the disproportionate burden of pollution in our City for decades. Thank you Chair Constantinides and Committee members for your efforts to highlight the serious impacts air pollution on public health in our city, and in particular in the neighborhoods where multiple sources of air pollution like trucks and power plants are clustered.

Today in my testimony I’d like to highlight some of the work NYLPI is doing with our community partners to reduce the levels of harmful air pollutants in low income communities and communities of color, and how the Council can take action to improve our air quality as well. First, the Council can pass Intro 1574, adopting Commercial Waste Zones which will reduce the amount of greenhouse gas and PM2.5 emissions from commercial waste trucks by more than 60%. Second, the Council can support efforts to transition the City’s power sources away from fossil fuel burning plants and invest in renewable energy. A step towards doing that is represented in the Renewable Rikers Act, three bills (Intro 1591, 1592, and 1593) introduced a couple of months ago.

Commercial waste zones present an opportunity to make great strides in reducing air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, while also accomplishing numerous additional goals such as improving street safety, increasing diversion of waste from landfill, and raising labor standards in a notoriously dangerous industry.

As many of you know, residents of communities where waste transfer stations and truck depots are clustered face much higher rates of asthma and respiratory health problems due to the idling diesel-burning trucks congregating around waste transfer stations and criss-crossing their streets. As you can see on the poster, the environmental justice communities in North Brooklyn and the South Bronx have a particular problem with asthma inducing air pollution, and are also the two
neighborhoods who had the most commercial waste truck trips per day according to 2018 data. That is no coincidence. Intro 1574 would greatly reduce the number of vehicles traveling in these communities, and has key provisions to ensure that any company submitting a bid would have to invest in cleaner trucks, which will go a long way to improving air quality and public health in overburdened communities.

The same communities who bear the brunt of our commercial waste processing are also overburdened by our fossil fuel-based power system in the City. Peaker plants – fossil-fuel power plants that fire up during times of peak electricity demand – spew harmful pollutants into our air and are located in many of the same neighborhoods where trucks and other industrial polluting facilities are concentrated.

Many peaker plants in New York City are over 40 years old. They can emit up to 20 times the levels of Nitrogen Oxides (NOx) as other power plants. When NOx combines with traffic emissions on hot sunny days – when peaker plants are more likely to be on – it results in dangerous high ozone levels. In New York City, exposure to ozone concentrations above background levels causes more than 400 premature deaths, 850 hospitalizations for asthma and 4,500 emergency department visits for asthma each year. Ozone’s health impacts are disproportionately borne by low-income New Yorkers.

New regulations from the state will mitigate NOx emissions but we can and must do more. We need to phase out peaker plants entirely and replace them with renewable energy and battery storage. The Council should take advantage of opportunities to build renewable infrastructure wherever possible – for example, by transferring Rikers Island to DEP as proposed in the Renewable Rikers Act (Intro 1591, 1592, and 1593).

We look forward to continuing to collaborate with the Council to pass Intro 1574 and the Renewable Rikers Act, to truly bring transformative progress to our air quality and reduce our City’s pollution.

Thank you.