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# A GREATER SENSE OF PRIDE

Congressman José E. Serrano  
and Environmental Justice in the Bronx

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“The concentration of waste treatment facilities  
and their fleets of diesel trucks are killing our  
children, our families, our older folks.”

**José E. Serrano**  
*Congressional Record*, 24 Feb. 1998.

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*Children and families in the South Bronx have suffered enough. Our communities must be treated fairly and with the same respect as other communities in the city and state.*

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**José E. Senano**, Press Release, April 5 2001

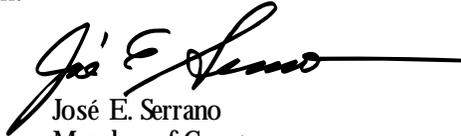
Dear Friends:

It is obvious that the poor suffer from unequal treatment in several facets of society. But beyond the direct socioeconomic effects of poverty that garner the most attention, the poor suffer additional inequality in the area of environmental policy. Not only are poor communities often unable to ward off environmentally harmful activities that invade their neighborhoods, but their local governments often lack the resources to enforce what little protections they should receive under existing laws.

Numerous scientific studies have pointed to the correlation between poverty and exposure to environmental harm, but we of the South Bronx don't need statistics to convince us that the link exists. Our neglected landscape— further marred by sewage plants, waste transfer stations, scrap metal yards and power generators— provides ample evidence that low income communities have borne the brunt of society's environmental ills.

What's at stake for the South Bronx as we wrangle with these issues is not merely relief for our nostrils. The often overlooked presence of noxious polluters and environmental eyesores in places where we live, work and play have taken a heavy toll on our economy, our ecosystems and our health. And as time passes, the price of inaction on our quality of life continues to rise.

Fortunately, more and more South Bronx residents are coming to recognize that clean and safe air, water and land are not just luxuries for the privileged, but undeniable rights due to all Americans— both rural and urban— regardless of their wealth, income, race or ethnicity. This trend is promising as we continue to build on the momentum of our communities' past successes; after all, only our unwavering vigilance to environmental inequities will finally achieve true environmental justice for ourselves and our children.

  
José E. Serrano  
Member of Congress

## **RESTORATION OF THE BRONX RIVER**

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The 23-mile-long Bronx River begins in Westchester County and flows through the heart of the Bronx before emptying into the East River. Along its banks lie Hunts Point, Soundview and other illustrious neighborhoods of the South Bronx, as well as the New York Botanical Garden and the Bronx Zoo.



The storied river, which possibly predates the Ice Age, is a landmark celebrated for its long history of use by various peoples. Before the arrival of Europeans, bounteous supplies of trout from the river helped to sustain the livelihoods of Native Americans who fished along its shores. In the 17th century, the Bronx River attracted European trappers with its abundance of beavers.

By the late 19th century, however, urbanization had transformed the river's once-pristine water into an open cesspool of industrial and household sewage. Despite numerous attempts to clean up the contamination throughout the next century, the condition of the portion of the river in the South Bronx failed to improve significantly. Fortunately, as increasing numbers of local residents came to appreciate the past and potential value of the urban river to their communities, they have made noteworthy strides to reverse the river's cycle of dilapidation.

The Bronx River's condition saw a major turning point when Congressman Serrano began his unflagging advocacy for its restoration. From the time that he first coordinated local and national drives to designate the river an American Heritage River, he has continually spearheaded Bronx River restoration efforts on the federal level by securing millions of dollars in federal funding. These funds have supported initiatives carried out both by local organizations and by federal government agencies.

#### BRONX RIVER

Congressman Serrano has:

- ❑ Directed the Army Corps of Engineers to study ecosystem restoration and obtained \$1,050,000 over the last five fiscal years for this purpose.
- ❑ Secured funding earmarks totaling \$13.5 million in support of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) land acquisition and restoration activities. In addition to restoring fishery habitats, conserving coastal land and establishing educational programs, these activities have made NOAA a full community partner.
- ❑ Obtained \$2,389,500 in Transportation funds over the past three fiscal years for the construction and extension of greenways along the river. The Soundview Greenway, when completed, will span the Soundview Park segment of the River. The funds also will extend the rest of the Bronx River Greenway through the cement plant site and from Bruckner Boulevard to Hunts Point Riverside Park.

## **SOUTH BRONX AIR QUALITY**

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South Bronx residents endure the most egregious environmental injustices in the realm of air quality. The statistics speak for themselves. New Yorkers suffer from the worst rates of asthma in the country, with over 10 percent of schoolchildren and over 6 percent of the total population afflicted by the respiratory disease. Conditions are even worse in the South Bronx. South Bronx children are hospitalized for asthma at a rate 250 percent higher than children in the rest of New York City, and 1000 percent higher than other children in New York State.

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***“While researchers continue to debate the root causes of asthma and New York public health officials focus on every theory other than pollution, our communities continue to breathe foul air and continue to sicken and die from respiratory illness.”***

José E. Serrano, *Congressional Record*, 24 Feb. 1998.

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As this undeniable asthma epidemic continues to inflict death and distress on New Yorkers and South Bronx residents, public health officials have rummaged around for factors to blame other than air quality. In focusing on other possible asthma causes

like emotional stress and genetic susceptibility, they attempt to divert attention from causes that they may be able to address.

The ubiquitous sources of foul air are not difficult to identify. Although the Bronx is only one of five boroughs, the South Bronx hosts a disproportionate share of waste transfer stations in New York City, and serves as a major center of industrial activity. Closely linked to these waste and industrial facilities is the omnipresence of diesel trucks, which create some of the highest volumes of vehicular traffic in the city.

Addressing these air quality problems is especially urgent for low income communities. The combination of badly polluted air

and poor access to health care can be devastating. Asthma, for example, is the number one cause of student absenteeism in New York City schools, and South Bronx residents also cope with abnormally high rates of other respiratory illnesses, infant mortality and immune deficiency.

In response to these ongoing difficulties, Congressman Serrano has worked to raise awareness about air pollution and secure federal funding for studies and programs related to air pollution abatement in the South Bronx. At times his advocacy has met with resistance from federal agencies, but his persistence has resulted in a strong start to efforts that will hopefully lead to clean air for all Bronx residents.

#### AIR QUALITY

Congressman Serrano has secured

- ❑ \$3.4 million in Environmental Protection Agency funds over fiscal years 1999 to 2002 for New York University to conduct the South Bronx Air Pollution Study. With cooperation from the local community, the study analyzes the environmental and public health effects associated with living near pollution sources, including waste transfer stations.
- ❑ \$711,000 over the past three appropriations cycles for the Strategic Greening Study, conducted by the Agriculture Department in cooperation with the Cornell University Extension Service, the U.S. Forest Service and the community. The urban silviculture research project studies how different trees and plants can offset the health effects of severe air pollution.

## **PARKS IN THE SOUTH BRONX**

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The scarcity of green space in our urban setting imparts ever more importance to our conservation of the small amount available. When properly managed, these small pockets of nature can revitalize communities by improving the aesthetics of the neighborhoods in which they reside. These improvements in turn attract residents, businesses, and visitors that can all reinvigorate local economies. And perhaps most important, good parks provide safe and clean settings where children can play and participate in programmed activities.



At a park in the 16<sup>th</sup> Congressional District, Congressman Serrano meets with volunteers participating in a federally-funded greening study to discuss the effects of trees on air quality.

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Parks, however, are not a trouble-free panacea for urban problems; the key to unlocking their benefits lies in their proper management. Just as healthy, well-managed parks can attract growth to an area, poorly maintained and abandoned parks not only cause social harm to the neighborhood, but also deter potential residential and commercial developers.

For these reasons, Congressman Serrano has labored tirelessly to improve the condition of parks in the South Bronx and prevent additional parks from falling into disrepair. Furthermore, in order to make park resources available to a wider range of residents, he has also sought funds for projects that improve both access to parks and their safety for their users.

Through these efforts, and with the help of community leaders and other members of the New York Delegation, Serrano has helped to ensure that these parks continue to serve their vital role as centers of recreational life for South Bronx residents.

## PARKS

Congressman Serrano has obtained

- ❑ A total of over \$2 million in fiscal years 1998 and 1999 for the Army Corps of Engineers to study, design and reconstruct the shoreline of Orchard Beach, which had been plagued by severe erosion. The beach receives over two million visitors each year, many of them low-income and minority.
- ❑ \$638,000 over five years for the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation to restore Joyce Kilmer Park. Since 1999, federal funds for the project have repaired the park's landscaping, constructed sidewalks and curbs, added perimeter fencing, and installed additional trash cans, bollards, and benches.
- ❑ \$500,000 in fiscal year 2001 for the development of a river house in Starlight Park, which would bring local residents back to the park to take full advantage of the recreational potential of its location on the Bronx River.

## THE BRONX AND BEYOND

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Recognizing the interrelationships of the environmental problems of the world and those of his district, Congressman Serrano has been a strong advocate for initiatives whose reach extend beyond the South Bronx.

### LOOKING OUTWARD

Congressman Serrano has

- ❑ Authored legislation to provide tax credits for businesses in EPA-designated "nonattainment areas" that convert to clean fuel vehicle technologies.
- ❑ Obtained Energy Department research funds for the development of the Center for Sustainable Energy Options at Bronx Community College. The Center promotes alternative fuel technologies.
- ❑ Supported full funding for the Agriculture Department's Urban Resources Partnership. In the South Bronx, the program funded walkways and community gardens in previously abandoned spaces.
- ❑ Supported full funding for climate modeling research by the International Research Institute for Climate Prediction at Columbia University.
- ❑ Obtained funding for the Wildlife Conservation Society in the Bronx. These funds supported the development of the Conservation Institute and the Fund for the Improvement of Education.
- ❑ Supported full funding for Global Learning and Observations to Benefit the Environment (GLOBE), a program that sponsors science training for teachers.
- ❑ Obtained \$500,000 in fiscal year 2000 for coral reef monitoring in Puerto Rico.

*Congressman José E. Serrano is currently serving his eighth term in the 108<sup>th</sup> Congress, representing the Sixteenth Congressional District in the South Bronx. He is Ranking Minority Member of the Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, State, and the Judiciary of the House Appropriations Committee, as well as a senior member of the newly-created Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security.*



**Congressman José E. Serrano**

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