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Turning Grease into Green Gas: Red Hook refinery to make fuel from fries  
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CHELSEA — Brent Arrow Baker is hoping to make the city's air cleaner by using French fries. The 36-year-old Lower East Sider — who likens himself to Johnny Appleseed, but of bio-fuels — is planning to build a refinery this winter in Red Hook where the vegetable grease refuse his company collects from local restaurants will be processed into eco-friendly fuel for trucks, buses, boats, trains and other diesel-run engines.

“In 1995, I was probably one of 50 people in the U.S. who ever heard of biodiesel,” Baker said. “Now, more than 50 percent of American households know what it is. It's an industry that's becoming a major replacement of petroleum.”

For the past three years, Baker had been rolling around town — and across the country — in a 1989 International Blue Bird school bus he outfitted to run on veggie grease as part of his educational mission. He sold that bus this summer to commit full time to his Tri-State Biodiesel Inc. facility.

“We have a small fleet of vacuum trucks that will go to local restaurants and collect waste from cooking oil, which is what's known as a ‘nuisance product’ because it's often disposed of illegally down the drain,” Baker explained. “You have to pay to dispose of your cooking oil, and if you're a restaurant operating on a small margin, you're tempted to dump it down the drain.”

Baker's company doesn't charge restaurants to pick up waste, and after the oil is processed, engines don't need any conversions or alterations. (Baker's chemist said the city-wide trans fats ban wouldn't affect the refinery's chemical processing of the foods.)

“The facility is ultra-low emission — no noxious odors, no smokestack. It's a closed-tank process that reclaims all chemicals that are used,” Baker explained. “This is the kind of clean, green development that will bring good paying jobs with benefits to a low-income area” and will help it cut down on pollution. “It makes sense to us,” said Phaedra Thomas, executive director of Southwest Brooklyn Industrial Development Corp., which had received a small grant from the New York Community Trust to pursue biodiesel projects. “We have a huge amount of buses and trucks in this area that provide a huge number of jobs for working class people. There are maybe 1,000 trucks and buses that are a potential market.”

Getting going

- With assistance from the Southwest Brooklyn Industrial Development Corp., Baker found the 17,000-square-foot site at the Columbia Street Marine Terminal, and completed the lease paperwork and bond applications.
- Baker is still working on funding for the project, which he said will cost under \$5 million.

City involved

Brent Arrow Baker has already presented his Tri-State Biodiesel project to the newly formed Mayor's Office of Long-term Planning and Sustainability.

As the city plans its growth for the next 25 years, City Hall wants to be sure sustainable practices, like biodiesel, are included.

That office's Sustainability Advisory Board — including activists, business leaders and real estate experts — met for the first time yesterday.

The board's chair, Deputy Mayor Dan Doctoroff told members the city was trying to develop a “cohesive” plan to tackle housing and open space needs as well as issues of climate change.

“We want to make New York City government a ‘green’ organization,” Doctoroff said. “We want to show the city leading by example.”