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CRITICISM OVER PERMIT PROPOSAL GROWS

A bill that would require permits for the purchase or use of instruments that detect biological or chemical agents or radiation is facing opposition that continues to grow.

The legislation, being pushed by the mayor and the police department, is intended to keep the use of such detectors above the radar of the police and to ward off “excessive false alarms and unwarranted anxiety” resulting from faulty readings. And by mandating that alarms from the devices be reported, it ensures that police would know about it, supporters argue.

But critics made themselves heard at the committee hearing on the bill, and a vote scheduled for that day was postponed. Detractors, including Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer and the the New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health, a labor-backed advocacy group, said that the bill was overly broad and that the concerns about false alarms were unprecedented. Stringer said the legislation “may undermine public freedom and add unnecessary red tape.”

Some council members have hesitated to supporting it as well. “My immediate reaction is that it’s a little overbroad, or a lot overbroad,” Councilmember Alan Gerson told Downtown Express.

And as word of the bill spreads, a variety of blogs have weighed in, none of which like it.

After being “lied to” by the federal Environmental Protection Agency about the quality of the air after the collapse of the World Trade Center, Mole333 says on the Daily Gotham that he can think of a reason why citizens should be allowed to independently test the air.

“Fundamentally this proposal limits OUR ability to test the safety of our personal, and our family, environment,” he says.

The SoHo Journal agrees, claiming that, “This bill is meant to keep us in line and keep us quiet.”

Steve Bellovin, a professor of computer science at Columbia, doesn’t think the bill is constitutional. “Regulating the Internet and assorted forms of mass media” might be an easier way to avoid public concern, he sarcastically recommends.

Spatial Sustain, an environmental technology blog, suggests that a proliferation of devices could actually be beneficial, rather than harmful. By harnessing “the consumer

pocketbook by signing up an army of individuals to set up sensors on their buildings,” the blog says the city could collect average readings for whole regions in the city.

<http://www.gothamgazette.com/blogs/wonkster/2008/01/18/criticism-over-permit-proposal-grows/>