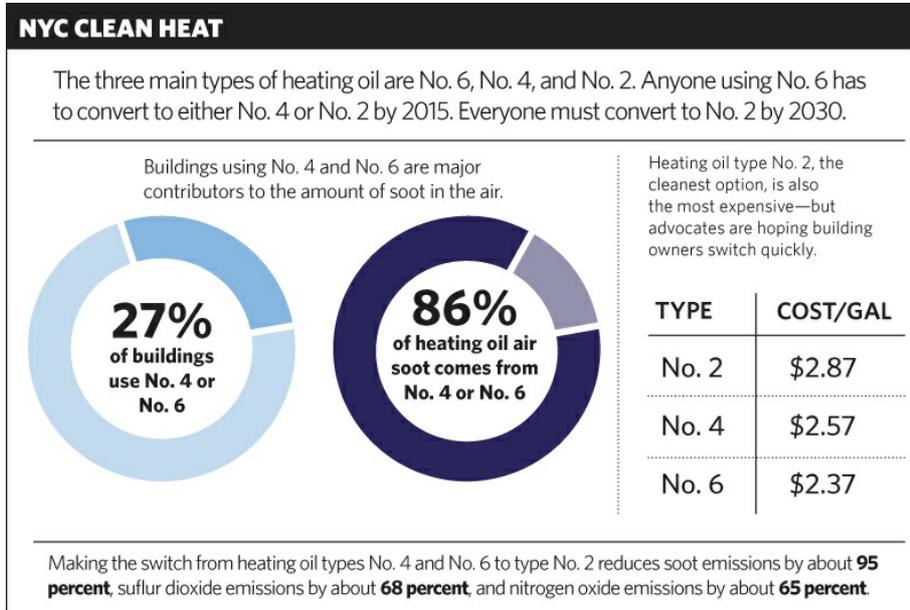


# West Harlem environmental group works to transition to cleaner heating oils



Graphic by Ryan Veling

BY [CHRIS MEYER](#) / Spectator Senior Staff Writer  
May 2, 12:29am

Local environmental group WE ACT for Environmental Justice is using a Columbia-funded grant to help reduce heating oil pollution in Northern Manhattan.

The \$45,000 grant from the West Harlem Local Development Corporation provided funding for WE ACT to hire at least 35 outreach representatives from Community District 9. It will support the group's efforts to transition local buildings from No. 6 heating oil, a highly viscous and polluting fuel, to more refined and clean alternatives.

The grant was one of the largest awarded in the development corporation's recent grant cycle, in which it [doled out a total of \\$2 million](#) of Columbia's money to 83 neighborhood organizations. The funding was promised in the 2009 Community Benefits Agreement, which the University signed in the wake of its Manhattanville campus expansion.

WE ACT's work is just one piece of a larger project by NYC Clean Heat, a [citywide program meant to spur compliance](#) with regulations requiring all city buildings to stop using No. 6 oil by 2015 and No. 4 oil, its slightly cleaner cousin, by 2030. Instead, buildings will use natural gas or the highly refined No. 2 oil.

According to a report by the Environmental Defense Council, a national environmental nonprofit, about 9,000 of the city's buildings are producing 86 percent of its heating oil-related air pollution. Most of those buildings are using No. 6 oil.

"It's kind of like when you cook rice, and you have some sticky rice stuck to the bottom of a pot," Milka Rodriguez, a green building coordinator at WE ACT, said.

"It's just cheap stuff at the bottom of the barrel," she said. "That's why people buy it."

Rodriguez said the grant will help her office expand outreach in the West Harlem area by petitioning landlords and tenant associations

to expedite the transition—despite the low price of No. 6 oil.

According to the Energy Information Administration, No. 6 oil is projected to be roughly 60 cents cheaper per gallon than No. 2 over the next decade.

WE ACT and NYC Clean Heat are also looking to discourage landlords from switching to the hybrid No. 4 oil, which will be legal until 2030. Rodriguez said although No. 4 is around 30 cents cheaper per gallon than No. 2, it has the potential to reduce boiler efficiency through soot buildup, eventually costing landlords more.

“I’m trying to get as many people as I can to see the value in No. 2,” she said. “And tenant associations can put pressure on the landlords, which is part of the reason we are advocating.”

WE ACT’s work is also specific to the area. Madeline Knaup, an account manager at NYC Clean Heat, said partnering with a local nonprofit made it easier for the citywide agency to address needs specific to Northern Manhattan.

The area “has a lot of buildings that are burning heavy oil, but they are smaller than in other parts of the city,” she said. “A lot of our work is with larger buildings, so it is good to have an organization like WE ACT work with smaller buildings, which we may not have the resources to help.”

Many buildings around Columbia, which is part of Community District 9, have already made the transition from heavier oils. According to a map compiled by NYC Clean Heat, most Morningside Heights buildings use oil that comes from natural gas. Knaup said gas is a good option for many buildings, even though the controversial practice of hydrofracking has politicized the fuel.

“It is a completely fuel-neutral program, so if a building has an issue with natural gas, they are in no way legally obligated to convert to natural gas,” Knaup said.

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By Melissa Cheung  
May 2, 1:35pm

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By Claire Ding  
May 2, 11:29am

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By Claire Ding  
May 2, 9:01am

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