By KAREN ZRAICK

It is a fairly unglamorous and lightly regulated task: serving legal papers to people who have been sued. Debt collection agencies and lawyers often farm out the work to private companies, which deliver the papers in person or by mail. They are known, in legal parlance, as process servers.

But, according to the City Council, too many of them have been shirking their duties. So on Thursday, the Council overwhelmingly passed a bill that aims to stop what members called a growing and alarming trend: instances in which the papers never reach their intended destination, leaving people unaware that they are being sued.

The legislation will require process servers to use a Global Positioning System to record the date, time and location of every service and to pass a test to get a license from the Department of Consumer Affairs. Process servers will also have to buy bonds to cover unpaid fines and judgments, a provision that Councilman G. Oliver Koppell, who abstained from the otherwise unanimous vote, criticized as too onerous for small businesses.

Problems arise because once unknowing debtors do not respond to lawsuits, the suits are sent to Civil Court, where a judge can freeze the debtors’ bank accounts and garnish their wages.

“Tens of thousands of New Yorkers are being sued for old debts which they may or may not owe,” said the bill’s lead sponsor, Councilman Daniel R. Garodnick. “Yet they are only learning they have been sued after they have lost and found that their bank accounts were frozen.”

Chad Marlow, a spokesman for the state and national associations of process servers, said the sector recognized the problem and had come to support the bill, after tussling with the Council over licensing requirements.

“It’s a very good step,” Mr. Marlow said. “We recognize that we had bad actors in our industry and that we needed to partner with government to get rid of them.”

A 2008 study by MFY Legal Services, a nonprofit law firm, found that fewer than 10 percent of consumer debtors in the boroughs outside Manhattan showed up to their court hearings, raising questions about notification procedures.

It is an issue that has become more pressing as the recession has sent more families into debt, council members said. Attorney General Andrew M. Cuomo has also been investigating improprieties in the industry. In April, his office filed suit against a process server agency on Long Island, alleging that servers had filed false affidavits. In addition, a class-action lawsuit filed in Manhattan in December alleges wrongdoing by process servers and debt-collection companies.