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Willets Point: A Defense

by Tom Angotti

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Here come the marshals again! After [evicting 23 businesses in the Bronx Terminal Market](#) to make way for a development deal with the Related Company, City Hall now wants to get rid of ten times that number in a Queens district. The city plans to use its power of [eminent domain](#) to foster what it calls economic development in the area around Willets Point. But it could instead mean economic disaster to the long-established business community that would be broken up and scattered. And while it proposes a multi-billion dollar project that would make Willets Point a “regional destination,” possibly with a hotel, convention center and retail space, the city’s planners appear to have little appreciation for businesses that already draw customers from all over the region.

Willets Point is a small triangle of land (often called “The Iron Triangle”) that sits near Corona and Flushing in the shadows of Shea Stadium. Indeed, the New York City Economic Development Corporation’s intense interest in Willets Point coincides with the announcement of the city’s [latest stadium deal with the Mets](#).

225 Businesses (Not 80)

While the Economic Development Corporation claims there are 80 businesses in this 48-acre area, a recent survey I conducted through the Hunter College Center for Community Planning & Development instead found 225 businesses that provide an estimated 1,300 jobs. The business survey was part of a land use study, including maps prepared by the CUNY Mapping Service, commissioned by Council Member Hiram Monseratte, who has questioned the city’s plans to relocate area businesses from his district.

What accounts for the huge statistical oversight by the Economic Development Corporation? Were the small auto repair outfits run by recent Latino immigrants invisible to the agency’s planners? Perhaps we counted the ones they missed because our survey was conducted in both English and Spanish. Perhaps the fact that most businesses are renters and not owners, and many share precious high-rent building space, has made them invisible to city officials. At a time when elected officials are acknowledging the important role of immigrant labor in the city’s economy, it would appear that the city bureaucracy has failed to open its eyes to a thriving business district that serves as an entry point for immigrant workers and entrepreneurs.

While the largest number of businesses are involved in auto repair, there are also several large parts and salvage operations. The largest employer in Willets Point, however, is The House of Spices (India), Inc. According to Girdhar Assar of The House of Spices, they employ 100 full-time people and are “the largest distributor of Indian foods in the United States.” A significant portion of land is used for waste transfer and building materials storage. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority also has a large strip of land used for rail yards and parking.

The Image of Blight

Over the years, public officials who have coveted the area’s excellent location at a nexus of highway and train lines have played along with a negative public image of Willets Point as a junkyard, dangerous, and foreboding. The city government has helped foster this image by failing to put in sewers, pave public streets, and fix sidewalks. In other words, city officials helped create a condition of “urban blight” that they then propose to fix by evicting the existing businesses.

One Saturday last fall, along with a class of Hunter College students, I walked every block of Willets Point with Joe Ardezzone, a member of the Willets Point Business Association and life-long resident of the area (in fact, the only resident). We saw a thriving though sometimes chaotic and noisy business district. On Willets Point Avenue, a driver would stop and ask one of the workers where to get a new carburetor and a windshield. The curbside broker would direct him to one of the many specialized businesses. A wide variety of parts dealers and salvage yards were there to meet every need of people who came from as far as northern Bronx and eastern Long Island. Ardezzone complained that “people don’t realize there are hard-working people here just trying to make a living.”

What we saw on the ground was the kind of bustling business district that economic development experts across the country keep trying to re-create in giant development schemes, often with little success. The many specialized auto repair shops in Willets Point both compete and cooperate with one another, and the links between them make for a cooperative business community offering a wide array of services.

An Opportunity For Clean-Up

By focusing on Willets Point, city officials have an opportunity to help strengthen this network instead of destroying it. At the same time they could confront head on some of the city's biggest environmental headaches. When auto repair facilities are concentrated, as they are in Willets Point, then City Hall has an opportunity to apply its pollution prevention programs and deal with the critical issues of waste and emissions. If these activities are dispersed, mechanics are less likely to use cleaner and more efficient technologies. More mechanics would end up working on residential blocks and dumping crank case oil down the city's storm drains, and it will be more difficult to regulate these businesses.

As for the waste transfer stations that occupy a big chunk of land in Willets Point, there are precious few alternative locations for them in Queens. By paving the streets and enforcing environmental regulations in Willets Point, city officials could help make these waste facilities a model of sustainable management. The dust and debris that workers and business owners have to deal with would diminish. And since Willets Point is right in the flight path for LaGuardia Airport, something needs to be done about the deafening roar of planes no matter what happens to the area!

Rich In Potential

The economic potential of Willets Point businesses can be linked to the growing recycling industry as well as auto repair. The proponents of redevelopment who are quick to call the Iron Triangle a big junkyard might have missed the recent front page article in The Wall Street Journal (March 21, 2006) that hails auto scrap yards as a big source of "healthy profits."

Contrary to the impression that The Iron Triangle is worthless, the total assessed value of property comes to some \$181 million. Property values and the number of jobs per square foot are roughly comparable to those in other areas zoned for heavy industry in the city, and so are tax revenues.

Even after planning for an improved auto repair and recycling district, it would still be possible to allow for some limited redevelopment for new industrial, commercial and recreational facilities. But this should be determined through open and transparent public planning, not a developer-driven process.

Developer-Driven Planning

Over the last three decades, Willets Point has been a favorite target for grandiose development plans, all of which failed when businesses refused to be displaced. When the city's development czar Robert Moses wanted to get rid of the local businesses, the Willets Point businessmen hired a young attorney named Mario Cuomo and beat Moses. A 1991 rezoning plan also went nowhere.

In 2004, the city's Economic Development Corporation issued a Request for Expressions of Interest to redevelop Willets Point, and recently selected several large companies to submit proposals. While development proposals may include only a portion of Willets Point rather than a blanket condemnation of the whole area, there are two problems with this piecemeal approach. First, it will pit property owners against each other, and can very well play into the hands of a small group of speculators that have started to move into the area. Secondly, it could pit the property owners against the large group of mostly Latino workers and business owners who rent (82 percent of the total) and who stand to lose everything. Even what might seem at first to be a generous relocation benefit could be worthless when it comes to finding comparable space in a city where low-cost industrially-zoned land is disappearing from sight.

If there were an open and transparent planning process incorporating all business owners and workers, and property owners and renters, the division of the territory in a redeveloped area might look quite different from the one that will be cooked up by the consultant firms hired by the big developers. The Economic Development

Corporation appears to be open so long as they keep tight control over the process, but not open enough.

Spotlight On Shea Stadium

The proposed new Shea Stadium, which would go up in the huge parking lot bordering Willets Point, is likely to overshadow the Iron Triangle in more ways than one. Local community groups are likely to focus on Shea, which long has been a sore point for many of them, because -- like so many other urban stadiums -- it turns away from its neighbors in the interest of getting fans in and out as fast as possible. Since the new Shea will have more luxury boxes and fewer affordable seats, more fans are likely to drive in and out by car, never stopping for *arroz con pollo* in Corona or Kimchee in Flushing. And if City Hall has its way, fans won't even be able to get a tire fixed in the neighborhood.

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