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A Sustainability Test at Willets Point

by Tom Angotti

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Mayor Michael Bloomberg called it “New York City’s next great neighborhood,” the city’s “first green community,” and an “integral part” of his long-range sustainability plan, [plaNYC2030](#). He was talking about Willets Point, a polluted 160-acre industrial area between Shea Stadium and Flushing that the city hopes to [redevelop](#).

But will the “new” Willets Point really be all of those good things? In the pursuit of “jobs and housing,” will anyone check to see if the new development is really sustainable?

Greening the ‘Iron Triangle’

The city’s [idea](#) is to put 5,500 housing units, a hotel and convention center, a million square feet of retail and 500,000 square feet of office space in an area that now has 225 businesses and employs some 1,800 workers. The Iron Triangle, as Willets Point is often called, has a large concentration of auto repair and service businesses, the largest distributor of Indian foods in the U.S., and several waste transfer facilities. A section of the area lacks public sewers, which the city has neglected to install despite [repeated requests](#) by business owners.

The claim that the Willets Point plan will be green rests on the promise that the existing contaminated land will be cleaned up, the new community will be transit-oriented because it’s on the Number 7 line, and maximum use will be made of energy efficient and other environmentally friendly building technologies. But since this is being sold as a “green and clean” model for New York City, this is the time to ask some hard questions.

The 10 Questions

Green Auto Repair: Could the city do more to “green” the existing auto repair shops, rather than simply closing them down or pushing them out? If the plan goes through, hundreds of mechanics in Willets Point will be forced to operate in low-tech storefronts and neighborhoods where the most logical location for dumping crank case oil is the city’s sewer system. Instead, the city could create an auto center using the latest pollution-prevention technology. This could sustain the livelihoods of area workers instead of threatening them.

Who Benefits?: Sustainability and green sound nice, but the question is always what and who gets sustained? The Willets Point proposal seems to do a pretty good job at sustaining real estate development in Queens. The city’s Economic Development Corporation has been negotiating the plan with big developers whose main commitment is to sustain their investors’ returns.

Clean Up or Clean Out?: Why does the whole area have to be cleared before environmental hazards can be eliminated? This sets an unfortunate precedent for cleaning up contaminated areas: You have to wipe everything out and start from scratch. Examples of remediation that don’t require massive relocation are plentiful.

Economic Effects: Sustainability should mean sustaining the economic livelihoods of people as well as preserving the environment. But under this plan, the thriving local economy in some immigrant communities in Queens could be overwhelmed by megaprojects and their corporate tenants.

The Future of Businesses: The city promises to offer job training, counseling, English language classes, legal and other services to workers who would be displaced by the Willets Point development. Business owners will be bought out. But even with such assistance, the many workers and businesses who have been in Willets Point for decades and even for generations, have created networks of clients and other businesses that would be difficult to rebuild if everyone is scattered. And a number of the businesses have already sold their land to speculators, so they won’t really reap the full benefits. One of the canons of sustainability is preservation and strengthening of existing economic and social networks.

Living with the Jets: Is this the right place to put housing? Willets Point is directly in the flight path of LaGuardia

airport and bordered by highways. If you think the planes are annoying during Mets games, imagine living there. To minimize the irritation to residents in such cases, developers generally install double-paned windows and construct fully climatized buildings, but this means people are stuck inside with their windows closed to keep out the noise and contamination. This hardly seems consistent with a green community.

Increased Congestion: How much parking will there be in and around this “transit-oriented development?” This phrase “transit-oriented development” can be used to sell just about any project in New York City which, after all, has subways and buses everywhere. But as is the case with Atlantic Yards in Brooklyn, many projects do not call for any additional transit capacity, so the development invariably means more crowded trains and buses – and more people opting to drive. The Number 7 subway line is already over capacity at peak hours and platform crowding is alarming. With climbing ticket prices, more and more Mets fans will be come to the game in with their SUVs. And since Willets Point is planned as a regional “destination,” its economic success will rely on drawing suburbanites who are less likely to use mass transit. At best, the area would be a bigger park-and-ride hub for suburbanites than it already is and the added traffic will further clog Queens' highways.

What about Corona? In his announcement the mayor mentioned the downtown Flushing plan and the city’s commitment to promote development in Flushing. But Willets Point is right next door to Corona, one of the city’s largest and most diverse Latino neighborhoods. It looks like the new residential enclave will be walled off from Corona, its retailers will tap stadium and convention business, and the project will have little spillover effect. Bloomberg may have had tacos in Mexico City, but will anyone check out Corona when they go shopping or to a Mets game in Willets Point?

Whose Parks? The city plan puts a park in the dead center of the new development. This “public” space will effectively be a backyard for the new tenants, walled off and disconnected from Flushing Meadows Corona Park and the Corona neighborhood.

Green and Grand or Blean and Bare: It will probably be another year before Willets Point gets through the city’s land use review process, Cleanup and development will undoubtedly take at least another five to 10 years. Changing economic conditions and future mayoral administrations could leave the project to languish or die, letting a once-active business district lie fallow for many more decades.

The Big Picture: This all leads to the final question. Are megaprojects, like the one planned for Willets Point, consistent with the vision of sustainable development. Or would more modest efforts, aimed at nurturing existing neighborhoods like Corona, be more sustainable and cost-effective?

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