

FOCUS - 12 of 42 DOCUMENTS

The New York Times

February 28, 2011 Monday
Late Edition - Final

Concern for Underclass As the City Progresses On Its Willets Point Plan

BYLINE: By DAN BILEFSKY**SECTION:** Section A; Column 0; Metropolitan Desk; Pg. 20**LENGTH:** 1050 words

Two years ago, as the mayor attended the Mets' home opener at the new Citi Field, Adrien Nicolescue, an auto mechanic from Romania, joined a procession of honking garbage trucks to protest the city's plans to condemn the nearby Willets Point area and build a \$3 billion project of apartments, office buildings, stores, restaurants and a hotel.

But as his comrades geared up for another showdown with the mayor at a public hearing on the project scheduled for Wednesday, Mr. Nicolescue decided to pack up and leave. "I am going home, back to Romania," he said, standing on the same pothole-pocked corner of Willets Point where he has been drawing in customers for windshield repairs for 36 years.

Willets Point, in Queens, is a 61-acre expanse of junkyards and auto-repair shops so squalid that local business owners compare it to Iraq. "I don't want to leave," Mr. Nicolescue said, "but I have nowhere to go. This may look like the third world, but it is my world."

For half a century, Willets Point has proved remarkably intractable -- Mayors Robert F. Wagner Jr. and Rudolph W. Giuliani were among those who failed in their attempts to give the area a facelift. But in the latest four-year skirmish, which has provoked heated debates on class and ethnicity, inspired furious lobbying on all sides and spawned allegations of conflicts of interest, the administration of Michael R. Bloomberg has gotten further than its predecessors, managing to persuade many of the larger businesses to sell out or relocate.

The city agency overseeing the project, the New York City Economic Development Corporation, hopes that at the hearing on Wednesday it can make the case that it is redeeming a hazardous industrial wasteland.

Seth W. Pinsky, president of the corporation, said in an interview that the project would create 5,300 new jobs, provide affordable housing and generate \$25 billion in investment over the next 30 years. He said that 29 developers had already expressed interest, and that the city would choose finalists this spring.

But opponents of the Bloomberg plan counter that the project is speculative and environmentally unsound. They insist that the area, however bedraggled, has become an Ellis Island of sorts for a newly arriving underclass that depends on it to get by. They also complain bitterly that the city is shutting down thriving small businesses that have nowhere else to go.

The city will have 90 days to respond to concerns raised at the hearing on Wednesday. Officials said they planned to proceed with the project, including seizing property, if necessary, by the middle of 2012.

Concern for Underclass As the City Progresses On Its Willets Point Plan The New York Times February 28, 2011
Monday

City officials estimate that Willets Point is home to 255 businesses, which employ about 1,700 people, some in sheds made of tin or cinder blocks. Of 74 property owners, 28 have agreed to sell their land or relocate, city officials say; the city already owns 90 percent of the property where the first five-year phase of development would go.

While opposition to the plans remains strong, people on both sides said that the city's divide-and-conquer strategy seems to have worked, with many of the largest landowners conceding defeat and planning to depart, leaving the smaller shops and the **immigrants** who work there to fight a lonely battle.

"I'm not going to fight a man like Bloomberg: You know you aren't going to win," said Daniel Sambucci, 80, who said he had agreed to accept an offer of a "few million" dollars from the city for his 2.5 acres of land and to relocate his 61-year-old auto salvage company to a nearby neighborhood. "They treated us pretty good. But I am upset that I paid \$50,000 a year in taxes for years for a place with no sewers. This place is worse than Iraq, and the city let it become this way."

On a recent afternoon, as garbage cans burned, Mexican norteno music waivered from boom boxes on the hoods of cars. Large pools of swirling dirty water overwhelmed unpaved roads. Locals complained that the police handed out tickets for parking cars on the sidewalk, even though there were no sidewalks.

Whatever the challenges, some are determined to stay. Michael Rikon, a lawyer representing 82 businesses that have refused to leave, said that he was preparing to file a lawsuit against the city, claiming that the project flouted environmental laws. But he acknowledged that history and precedent were not on his side.

In November 2009, the Court of Appeals, New York's highest court, ruled that the state could take businesses and private property for the \$4.9 billion Atlantic Yards project in Brooklyn. Legal experts said that decision reaffirmed New York's right to use eminent domain even as many state legislatures have been moving in the opposite direction.

While some critics have portrayed the redevelopment of Willets Point as a class battle by a billionaire mayor intent on supplanting scrap metal with sushi, the Bloomberg administration has some unlikely allies in the project. "We see Willets Point as a form of modern-day slavery in which poor people are working in conditions worse than in their home countries," said Eduardo Giraldo, head of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Queens. "It is better to shut it down."

Mr. Pinsky, of the Economic Development Corporation, stressed that the first phase of the project would include 140 affordable housing units and noted that the city had offered free English language lessons and training for Willets Point's dispossessed. But, Mr. Giraldo said, many of the **immigrant** workers could not take advantage of the classes because they were already working 12-hour days.

Meanwhile, some small business owners are frustrated that their neighbors are getting lucrative deals from the city and they are not. Ralph St. John, whose company has built apartment buildings and parks for the city for nearly 20 years, said he had been offered nothing, and that his 18 employees would lose their jobs if he were forced to leave.

City officials said that Mr. St. John's land was not earmarked for development in the first phase, and that by the time the city was ready to make a deal with him, his land would probably have increased in value. But Mr. St. John, who is 77, does not want to live in limbo.

"If you want what I got, act like a man and come face me," he said. "Don't use eminent domain and steal from me."

URL: <http://www.nytimes.com>

LOAD-DATE: February 28, 2011

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

Concern for Underclass As the City Progresses On Its Willets Point Plan The New York Times February 28, 2011
Monday

GRAPHIC: PHOTOS: Adrien Nicolescue has worked on the same corner of Willets Point for 36 years, but he is leaving.

Ralph St. John, a contractor, said his 18 workers would lose their jobs if he were forced to leave.

Daniel Sambucci, 80, plans to move his business after accepting the city's offer of a "few million." (PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARCUS YAM FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper

Copyright 2011 The New York Times Company