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## A Dilapidated Tract of Queens, and a Fight to Control Its Future

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With their patched zinc roofs and graffiti-covered walls, the auto repair shops are the most visible and unsightly presence in the bedraggled industrial triangle known as Willets Point. Squeezed between the Mets' new stadium and the Van Wyck Expressway, near the No. 7 line's penultimate stop in Queens, the area has no sidewalks or lights to brighten its unpaved roads, no sewers, piped water or heat.

In most of the shops, and in the junkyards speckled among them, buckets double as toilets and kerosene torches serve as radiators, while the constant trickle from a hydrant functions as a communal sink. It gets so cold in winter that men who have worked there for a while, like Jorge Sabando, 56, a mechanic from Ecuador, wind up with arthritis and take over-the-counter painkillers to carry them through the day.

"This," Mr. Sabando said, "is not a place for the frail."

No one seems to disagree that Willets Point needs help. But when Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg unveiled a plan last year to overhaul the area with a hotel, school and convention center, homes, offices, parks and retail stores, two distinct groups rose up in opposition.

One comprises the owners of the area's largest businesses, who own half the land in Willets Point and who have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on lobbyists, consultants and political contributions to the City Council members who will vote on the city's plan.

The other consists of auto shop workers and shop owners who rent space in Willets Point. They are, for the most part, poor and Latino, and can afford to do little more than print T-shirts denouncing the project.

In public, the two groups present a picture of perfect unity, waving signs and chanting, "Justice for Willets Point." But in reality, each side is motivated by different concerns and fears about its survival.

The Bloomberg administration has stepped up efforts in recent weeks to find new space for the big-business owners, offering above-market prices for some of their land.

But most owners say they will not leave Willets Point and will fight the city should it try to seize their properties by eminent domain. The small-business owners, on the other hand, are willing to move, but city officials said that they could not relocate the renters until the city had acquired all the land in Willets Point. And even then, there may not be a place to put all of them.

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The small-business owners say they feel neglected by the deep-pocketed big-business owners and are unsure of their future.

"This is a power game, and we're the weakest player," said Arturo Olaya, an **immigrant** from Colombia who has run an auto body shop for 15 years at a rented garage on 36th Avenue.

There are an estimated 255 business in Willets Point and about 90 percent of them are thought to operate from rented space, according to city figures, which are imprecise because of the patchwork nature of the neighborhood.

The larger companies employ about 1,200 people and have held billions of dollars in contracts with the city over the years -- to provide sewer and water pipes, repair bridges and roads, and clean up the World Trade Center site after the Sept. 11 attacks.

But now the owners say they feel betrayed by city officials.

"The very hands that fed them are the hands they're going to shoot," said Daniel Feinstein, owner of Feinstein Iron Works, which produces most of the structural steel used in public school construction in the city. "But guess what: We're fighting back."

The Bloomberg administration is already facing hurdles. In a letter to the city's Planning Commission, 32 City Council members said they would reject the plan if the city did not take eminent domain off the table. And just as the city reached a handshake agreement with the owner of a waste management company, a previous deal with a junkyard owner hit a roadblock when it was discovered that zoning rules did not allow that kind of business at the site where it was to relocate.

The area's largest business owners, who have formed a group called the Willets Point Industry and Realty Association, have held weekly meetings to discuss strategy and, one person familiar with the meetings said, to compare offers they have received from the city.

Since 2006, when the Bloomberg administration asked developers for proposals to revamp the area, Mr. Feinstein and the other members of the association have paid almost \$200,000 to the lobbying firm of the former City Council speaker Peter F. Vallone Sr. and hired the public affairs firm that employs the former mayoral candidate Fernando Ferrer, who will try to persuade the Council to reject the project this fall. The association also filed a federal lawsuit against the city in April for failing to provide basic utility and public works services in Willets Point.

The group's members have contributed almost \$180,000 since 2006 to the campaigns of eight City Council members from Queens, including \$45,000 to Melinda R. Katz, who chairs the Council's Land Use Committee, and \$60,000 between January and July to Councilman Hiram Monserrate, whose district includes Willets Point and who has been one of the development plan's most vocal opponents.

The auto repair shop owners and their workers, for their part, have had little beyond determination and \$4,000 in cash to press their point. Earlier this year, Mr. Olaya, the Colombian **immigrant**, and Sergio Aguirre, a community organizer who once repaired cars in Willets Point, started their own group, the Willets Point Defense Committee, with 40 paying members who contributed \$100 apiece to finance their efforts.

They have used the money to buy the white-and-green shirts they wear at protests, print signs and rent a bus that took them to a public hearing held last month by the Planning Commission, which will vote on the project on Sept. 24.

One of the group's members, Blas Olivares, an arthritic 52-year-old from Chile who has an auto-glass repair shop on 36th Avenue, said some of the lobbyists working for the big-business owners' association have offered their services. "Five thousand dollars a month is one of the prices that I recall," he said. "We wish we could have the help, but we can't afford it."

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Meanwhile, the city has set up a job training program that will be available even to illegal **immigrants**, who are believed to make up about 40 percent of the work force in Willets Point -- an area that Mayor Bloomberg once called a "euphemism for blight, " but which represents a lifeline to the barely trained men and women who toil in its automotive shops and to the vendors who peddle juice, socks and cellphone holders along its pockmarked streets.

Robert C. Lieber, the deputy mayor for economic development, said the city was still in the "relatively early stages" of devising a relocation plan for the Willets Point tenants. For now, Mr. Lieber said, the priority is negotiating with owners of businesses and property in the area. Finding adequate land for the types of business found in Willets Point had been one of the biggest challenges, in part because of a scarcity of heavy manufacturing zones in the city, Mr. Lieber said.

Another city official, who was not authorized to speak publicly about the project, said that the city would probably not be able to relocate all the auto repair shops. The reason, he said, was that some neighborhoods might simply not want them.

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**GRAPHIC: PHOTOS:** The Mets' new stadium, Citi Field, was built across from the auto body shops that are so prevalent in Willets Point, Queens.

Jorge Sabando works at New York Auto Repair, one of many businesses that would be displaced by a city development plan.(PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHARD PERRY/THE NEW YORK TIMES) MAP: Willets Point Denizens Speak Out: Businesses in the gritty industrial triangle are trying to stop the mayor's plan to build a convention center, offices and homes.(PHOTOGRAPH BY THE NEW YORK TIMES IMAGE BY TELE ATLAS VIA GOOGLE EARTH)

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