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Left in Limbo: Willets Point Businesses Face An Uncertain Future

BY JACOB KAYE

Sam Sambucci stood in a circle with several other business owners in the heart of Willets Point, Queens on a hot afternoon in July.

Loud, heavy trucks drove by at a snail's pace, making their way through workers walking the streets, cars double and triple parked on the sides of the road and potholes like craters taking up all the space that remained. Sambucci and his colleagues discussed the state of their neighborhood in the center of the mess.

Fences were installed by the New York City Department of Housing Development and Preservation earlier in the week, blocking off several streets the agency said were de-mapped. The chaos of the neighborhood was now relegated to a smaller area.

The business owners were waiting for Nicole Garcia, the Queens Borough Commissioner of the Department of Transportation, and a few members of Queens Community Board 7. They were going to give a walking tour to the officials, and plead with them to fix their streets.

Sambucci and his colleagues were fed up with the condition of the Iron Triangle, as the neighborhood is often called. In addition to the poor condition of the streets, the area is riddled with abandoned car parts and litter, there is little to no police presence in the neighborhood and, in all 61-acres of Willets Point, there is not a single working toilet because there is no sewage system.

Willets Point has been eyed for development for over a decade. But in that time, the project has sputtered and stalled, with little to be said in the way of progress but a few acres of demolished land, known as Phase 1, and a plan for an environmental review. But as the city renews its promise to develop the area, business owners say they are being ignored and quietly forced out.

“They’re creating such a dangerous situation,” Sambucci said. “They are not providing the basic facilities for us to survive.”

Sambucci and his fellow business owners believe that the city hasn’t paid enough attention to them. They have ignored the existing businesses for reasons that are unclear.

The Economic Development Corporation, the agency in charge of the development, did not respond to repeated requests for comment for this story.

Sambucci says that he’s been willing to sell his property to the city, which already owns six-acres inside Willets Point. He doesn’t see a future in the neighborhood.

“I tell the EDC, every meeting, ‘I want to sell,’” Sambucci said.

They always refuse.

A Leftover Corner

Willets Point is a 61-acre neighborhood populated almost exclusively by auto shops. The neighborhood sits in the shadow of Citi Field, the home of the New York Mets. To its west, is Flushing Creek, one of the most polluted bodies of water in New York City.

The Whitestone Expressway and the Van Wyck Expressway outline the neighborhood from either side.

At the turn of the 20th century, Willets Point was a pristine wetland, according to Jeffrey Kroessler, an urban historian in New York City. But as the city expanded, Willets Point became a dumping ground for the city's growing waste.

"Willets Point is a leftover corner from the massive transformation that began in the early 20th Century," Kroessler said. "It's really an anomaly."

Around that time, the city leased most of Willets Point to an ash removal company. By the 1930s, the company had left the area covered with a layer of ash 30-feet thick on average, according to the EDC. And while the city terminated its contract with the ash removal company in 1934, the dumping ground had already inspired F. Scott Fitzgerald to create the neighborhood known as the 'Valley of the Ashes,' in his classic novel *The Great Gatsby*.

Because of the neighborhood's proximity to two major roadways, auto shops began to move in during the 1940s. Willets Point has remained that way ever since.

"I don't know that anyone living can remember a time when there was not this kind of Iron Triangle of auto body repair shops and other necessary urban functions that had been pushed to the margins," Kroessler said.

The idea to redevelop Willets Point began in 2008, under former Mayor Michael Bloomberg. According to the initial plans to redevelop the area, the New York City Economic Development Corporation planned to have all 61-acres of Willets Point under city control before the redevelopment began.

After submitting an application to the City Planning Commission, the EDC converted Willets Point into a special district in order to develop it. Under the application, the EDC said it would redevelop all 61-acres of Willets Point at once.

"The entire Willets Point Development Project must proceed comprehensively and must not be phased," then-Queens Borough President Helen Marshall recommended in the EDC's application.

As part of the grand development, Bloomberg envisioned Willets Point as a mixed-use area. Affordable housing, commercial space, a hotel, a convention center and a new K-12 school, were all part of the former mayor's master plan for the neighborhood in 2007.

Developers began to bid for the project. In 2013, two major development companies, The Related Companies and Sterling Equities, teamed up to take on the project together and formed the Queens Development Group.

The executive board of both Related and Sterling are partially made up of people who have ownership of the New York Mets and Citi Field. The city leased the land to the development group for \$1 with the provision that the city could buy back the land at a later date.

Willets Point was divided into phases, despite the initial proposal, and a new mall was set to come to Phase 1 to subsidize the development of housing, according to Michael Gruen, president of The City Club, a group that sued the developers over the development of the mall.

Gruen and the City Club won the lawsuit in 2017, arguing that the land the mall was to be built on was protected parkland. The mall was dead and development stalled.

“We flat out won,” Gruen said. “This was just a perfect case for us.”

In February 2019, Mayor Bill de Blasio signed a letter of intent, promising to get the development of Willets Point back on the right track. Most of the original plan remained.

Over 1,000 units of affordable housing are set to be built in Phase 1. In addition to the housing, two proposals were put forth by the Willets Point Task Force, a group created by de Blasio in order to jumpstart the project.

One proposal calls for a soccer stadium and a hospital. The other, a more traditional mixed-use development – residential space, parks, a school, emergency services and a health center.

A final decision on the future of Phase 1 has not yet been made. There are about 100 businesses inside the remainder of Willets Point.

It’s this phasing process, business owners say, that has caused so many of their problems.

“It’s a stranglehold on the businesses that are still operating,” Sambucci said.

When HPD installed the gates around Phase 1 in July, Sambucci said he saw trouble coming. His prediction, he said, has come true.

“My business is probably down 40 percent,” Sambucci said.

Andrea and Paul Cohen have owned an auto-repair shop in Willets Point for 30 years. They said the neighborhood has always been neglected by the city, but that it’s gotten worse in the past decade.

Both are past retirement age and dream about selling their property and traveling the world.

When the city first announced it would be redeveloping the area, the Cohens were excited. Their time had come.

“My wife wants to travel around the world,” Paul Cohen said. “If they buy my property, I’ll have enough to travel 10 times over. But that’s the problem, they bought and stopped one block from us.”

The Cohens, like Sambucci, feel ignored. The feeling of being ignored, he said, has played out in the taxes he paid.

“I pay \$70,000 a year and I don’t have a sewer,” Cohen said. “They charged me for sewers up until four years ago. I called them up and I said, ‘You’re charging me every three months for sewers.’”

After inspectors came to the Cohen’s property to confirm that they didn’t have a sewer, the couple was no longer required to pay a tax on sewage.

“What they said is, ‘We’re not going to charge you no more,’” Cohen said. “And I said, ‘What about the 30 years I paid?’ and they said, ‘Well, we’re only going to give you two years of the money back.’”

And this isn’t the only way business owners have lost money, Sambucci says.

Because of the phasing and the uncertainty of the development, Sambucci says he’s been unable to invest in his property.

“We were told back [in 2008] that we’d be gone in three years and here we are 12 years later,” Sambucci said.

Arturo Oyala owned a second-hand auto parts shop in Phase 1 of the Willets Point development. Now that the plot of land sits empty, he operates his business out of a truck on whatever free space of road he can find in the neighborhood.

“It’s very unfair. I don’t know what we’re going to do,” Oyala said. “We have to survive.”

Like Oyala, Sambucci finds it hard to see a future where he is able to operate a successful business inside the Iron Triangle. Development is coming and he hasn’t been told what his place in it will be.

“How does a business make any changes to their business when they really don’t know?” Sambucci said. “It leaves us in limbo again.”