

Going ‘green’ has Willets Point seeing red



Long-neglected area of New York City slated to become ecofriendly development; locals feel ignored.

By [Matthew Shaer](#) | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor / May 22, 2008

The pavement surrounding J and L Auto, at the corner of 36th Ave. and Willets Point Blvd., is split open into dozens of fist-sized fractures, exposing the remains of the worn cobblestone underneath. It is a reminder of the storied history of this neighborhood, which sits west of the Flushing River, under the shadow of Citi Field, the future stadium of the New York Mets. It’s also a testament to decades of systemic neglect, both from the city and the mechanics and auto body specialists who work here.

Hollowed-out wrecks line Willets Point, and industrial runoff spills freely into large, muddy puddles. There are no sidewalks in the “Calcutta of New York,” as it is locally known. There is no sewer system. Shops are packed shoulder to shoulder along the streets, topped by corrugated metal, emblazoned with bright yellow and red signs, and filled with employees who wander out occasionally into the sunlight to offer “the very lowest price.”

“People forget – Willets Point isn’t a town,” says Andrew Wiedhopf, a longtime employee of J and L Auto. “It isn’t a city. It’s just one, enormous, ugly junkyard.”

It’s also, Mr. Wiedhopf concedes, a battleground, although – like most mechanics operating in the area – he estimates that the fight will soon be over. Earlier this year,

Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced plans to level the area's garages and repair shops, paving the way for New York City's first "green neighborhood." The designation is based on a few key initiatives: the widespread use of green building technologies to minimize energy use; a wealth of parks, playgrounds, and walkways, which would drive up pedestrian traffic; and the incorporation of "sustainability principles" into design, construction, and cleanup.

The city will also build 5,500 units of housing to serve "a mix of incomes and demographics," 500,000 square feet of office space, and a large-scale convention center, according to the New York City Economic Development Corporation. **[Editor's note:***The original version misstated the number of housing units the city plans to build.***]**

"It's about sustainability in the long term, and it's about development. We're very optimistic," says Jeff Roberts, vice president of Public Affairs at the NYCEDC. "It's already in motion."

But the plan has been met with fierce resistance from local councilmen and business owners, who say that the city has not adequately addressed compensation for displaced workers. In late April, 29 members of the city council sent an open letter to Robert Lieber, the deputy mayor of economic development, calling the redevelopment "unacceptable." Council members have subsequently sought to block the redevelopment at the district level, although it is unclear whether they will prevail, especially in light of the opening of adjacent Citi Field next spring.

"I'm absolutely not against a green-environment situation," Councilman Tony Avella says. "For instance, if the city had put in the infrastructure a long time ago, the development would have taken care of itself. It's this heavy-handedness: The city hasn't done anything for decades, and now they come in and sweep aside these businesses, some of which have been owned for generations."

The firestorm – played out loudly and viciously in the media here – has raised questions about the implementation of a so-called green neighborhood, a concept with widespread appeal for urban planners. Europe has toyed with some large-scale greening projects, including Sweden's commitment to break dependence on fossil fuel by 2020 through the implementation of "eco-incentives." Abu Dhabi, in the United Arab Emirates, recently began work on the first solar-powered, car-free district, tentatively called Masdar City.

New York City, however, is not a blank slate, like the architecturally young Abu Dhabi. Over the decades, the car-repair industry has become deeply entrenched in this part of Queens, necessitating a top-down – and potentially messy – approach from government officials. Worry over the use of eminent domain by city officials is widespread on the streets of Willets Point, for instance, and Councilman Avella alluded to that possibility several times.

Moreover, some scientists say the discussion of "greenness" has been overrun by the political nature of the redevelopment plan. The label of "first green neighborhood is

factually accurate, if a little specious,” says Stephen Hammer, director of the Urban Energy Project at Columbia University. “Anyone who can do it will be the first.”

Dr. Hammer says it’s become a question of “political will. We have the off-the-shelf technology to do things better than we can do them now. But it takes a lot to say we’re going to come in and remake the form and content of a neighborhood. Here’s a question I’ve been talking about a lot with colleagues: As we look to the future in a more carbon-constrained world, are we going to ... need to level large portions of existing communities?”

Brad Lander, director of the Pratt Institute for Community Development, cautions against using Willets Point as a litmus test for a green neighborhood. “I have a somewhat cynical take, because it’s mostly marketing,” says Mr. Lander, whose organization promotes sustainability. “It’s not enough to say, ‘We’re just going to focus on new construction.’ It’s got to be a mix of mandates, incentives, and neighbor-to-neighbor conversation [for existing neighborhoods]. We need to change a lot of things here.”

Wendy Fleisher, sustainability project manager at the Pratt Institute, sees widespread interest in “greening” from block associations and community groups in the metropolitan area. “There’s not much government regulation there, and people are still getting involved,” she says.

Lander points out that it’s not “part of sustainability to displace manufacturing and replace it with high-end housing.” In other words, demolishing Willets Point won’t eliminate toxic runoff. The problem would shift: “People would get their cars chopped up in New Jersey.”

The answer may lie in an uneasy compromise. The NYCEDC has estimated that it can offset industrial job loss with 7,000 new permanent jobs and 20,000 construction jobs. (An outlandish projection, say some opponents to the plan.) The city also says it will provide job training and placement services, along with English as a Second Language test preparation for current workers, most of whom are immigrants.

“It has to be a mix of top-down and ground-up,” says Adam Friedman, executive director of the New York Industrial Retention Network, which advocates on behalf of the city’s manufacturing sector. “There has to be a consensus.”

Mr. Friedman says the city can start by working with business to promote “energy efficiency, proper waste disposal, and sustainable materials. We need to upgrade the current operations first,” he says. “This is one of the most densely built environments in the US.... The situation is infinitely complex.”

[Editor’s note:*The original subhead mis-characterized the constituents of Willets Point.***]**