

Robert LoScalzo presentation at
Property Rights Foundation of America conference
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Willets Point Street Access: The City Gives and the City Takes Away

I'm Robert LoScalzo, documentary video producer. Since 2007, I've been following efforts by the City of New York to redevelop Willets Point. I'm speaking on behalf of Willets Point United, the coalition of property and business owners.

Many of you have attended this conference during prior years and have heard about Willets Point, so I'll give just a brief description of the area before getting to the recent news.

Located in Queens, New York, Willets Point consists of 62 acres. For many decades, it has been an industrial business district, densely packed with a variety of different types of businesses – manufacturing, recycling, food distribution – but it's best known for its network of automotive repair shops. Many of them are owned and operated by immigrants, with an ethnic diversity representing all parts of the globe.

It's an area where a large amount of work is accomplished. As such, it isn't glamorous, but is loaded with functional work spaces.

It so happens that Willets Point is in a very desirable location. Zooming way out, you see that it's just five miles from Manhattan. It's also right across Flushing Bay from LaGuardia Airport – and it might be impacted by the expansion of the airport in connection with an AirTrain which is in the planning stages – a project championed by Governor Andrew Cuomo. This is a potential AirTrain route that is now undergoing environmental review. The idea is that passengers would connect with public transit at the Willets Point station.

Willets Point is situated directly across the street from CitiField stadium, where the New York Mets play baseball. To be very clear, on one side of the street you have CitiField stadium, and on the other side, the Willets Point industrial businesses. The businesses are willing to co-exist with the stadium. The other way around, not so much.

The owners of the Mets happen to own a real estate development firm, Sterling Equities, and since at least the early 1990s they have had their eyes on Willets Point property as developable land.

In 2007, the City announced a generic redevelopment plan for all of Willets Point, which would remove all of the existing uses and property owners, and replace them with the “next great neighborhood.” Willets Point was designated an urban renewal area, which can be a trigger for eminent domain.

In a closed-door process, the City designated as developer of Willets Point an entity that is fifty percent comprised of the Mets owners’ real estate firm. However, their plan was prevented by litigation – They would have developed not only Willets Point, but also constructed a shopping mall on parkland located west of CitiField. The Court of Appeals ruled that they had not obtained state legislative approval to impact that parkland. Irene was one of the Petitioners in that lawsuit.

Meanwhile, under the threat of eminent domain, the City was able to acquire 23 acres of Willets Point land from its former private owners. The City evicted businesses from there, and tore down most structures, leaving 23 acres of vacant, City-owned land, directly across from CitiField stadium. They call this area “Phase One” of the entire Willets Point site.

So Willets Point is now divided into a Phase One and a “Phase Two”, existing side by side. In the Phase Two land, 39 acres, scores of industrial businesses continue to operate today, as they have for decades.

So that’s the basic lay of the land – there’s a Phase One which is vacant and prioritized for development, and a Phase Two which is occupied. Now it’s important to understand the flow of traffic in and around Willets Point, and the key streets people rely on to access it. I’m going to overlay the street grid.

And I want to distinguish between streets on the perimeter, and streets in the interior – because the City has distinguished between them in determining how much maintenance they receive. Along one outside edge, you have 126th Street, with CitiField stadium across the street. 126th Street has always been well maintained, as it services CitiField and Mets

games. Going along 126th Street, you could turn into any of the interior avenues, where shops used to be, to reach businesses now in Phase Two. 37th Avenue is particularly important, as it is the only direct connection between 126th Street and the heart of Willets Point.

Northern Boulevard is the northern exterior street, which is well maintained.

There are three more north/south streets, with 127th Street going all the way down to Willets Point Boulevard.

Willets Point Boulevard is a broad interior street that stretches all the way from Roosevelt Avenue to Northern Boulevard.

All of the streets except Northern Boulevard are two-way streets. There should be good access to any address. But a key aspect of the interior Willets Point streets is that for decades, the City intentionally disregarded their condition – allowing them to become severely dilapidated. The City collects steep taxes, but refused to repair or maintain the roadways.

Conveniently, the City then leveraged the third-world conditions that it created, to justify condemnation in order to remedy the problems.

Over the years, the property and business owners pleaded with the City to repair the streets. This included testifying on the record at annual budget hearings to request that funds be allocated to resurface Willets Point streets. The local community planning board always supported those requests, but the requested relief never actually materialized.

Early this year, the only street where there were rumors of changes coming was 126th Street, which fronts CitiField stadium. There were reports that the Mets were planning to rename 126th Street “Seaver Way”, in honor of former Mets pitcher, Tom Seaver. The roadbed of 126th Street was in good condition.

Nonetheless, in April, the City Department of Transportation milled the entire seven-block stretch of 126th Street. Then, they re-paved all of it. Seven blocks long.

They had to anticipate that Willets Point folks would then fume, “Why did you unnecessarily re-pave that entire street, but continue to ignore us?” And, they did.

To be clear, here is it from above. The repaved 126th Street is shown in white. Perhaps anticipating the outcry, they provided a “token” re-paving of two other short street “segments”: This portion of 126th Place, and the parallel portion of 127th Street.

I must point out that on 126th Place, there are zero businesses along the entire west side of the street – that’s a vacant building. So re-paving that street gives little benefit.

Meanwhile, on June 27th, the Mets held their renaming ceremony on the newly-paved 126th Street, which is now called “Seaver Way”. The City even installed the new “Seaver Way” street signs, as the Mets wanted. But a few blocks away in the heart of Willets Point, these conditions continued.

That really infuriated property and business owners.

Irene Prestigiaco mo took the lead, and went door-to-door to gather petition signatures, demanding that the City stop its neglect of Willets Point streets. Irene had to explain to each business owner what they were being asked to sign, a process that took substantial time and patience. The petition was presented at the community board, mailed to the City Department of Transportation, and promoted to the press.

At the next community board committee meeting, the Queens Borough Transportation Commissioner attended. She announced that the City has allocated \$17 million in its executive budget, to reconstruct streets in the Willets Point Phase Two area. When the board asked when, she said they hope to be able to begin the work by the year 2022. She said this will be a major undertaking, beyond the in-house capabilities of the Department of Transportation, and has to be bid out to contractors.

The board asked her whether there was any remedy that could be implemented sooner – because waiting three years for useable streets is unreasonable. She replied that she and engineers would have to visit Willets Point to assess it. The board asked her when, and she committed to a date.

What happened next, I honestly never thought I would see: July 8, an on-site meeting in the heart of Willets Point between the Queens Commissioner, community board leaders, and property and business owners. Commissioner Garcia got quite the earful from everybody, and walked Willets Point boulevard.

As a newspaper reported, it was a “Bumpy ride on Willets Point tour”. That news report says that Commissioner “Garcia said that the state of the roads in Willets Point makes it so that a quick fix is not possible.”

But just a few weeks later, these signs suddenly went up: “Road Repair”. We wondered, what will this “repair” consist of? Two workers spilling buckets of asphalt?

On the night of August 23, a crew of about 30 together with all sorts of heavy equipment and sophisticated paving machinery swooped in – this is a very noisy, odorous, and fast-moving process – and in just a few hours, re-paved a long stretch of Willets Point Boulevard from 34th Avenue to 127th Street. Unbelievable.

The following week they returned, and re-paved 127th Street between 34th Avenue and Willets Point Boulevard; and 35th Avenue.

Here’s the map; in white is what they paved. Here’s a before-and-after comparison: The intersection of 127th Street and 35th Avenue, before and after the work. Remember, this is after years of persistent pleading by property and business owners. I cannot overstate how much of a pleasant surprise this was. When Irene saw this for the first time, she remarked it is like “a work of art.”

Granted, they paved a strip twenty feet wide down the middle – enough for one lane each way. Beyond each side is still a dirt road or crumbled sidewalk. But at least it facilitates a flow of traffic.

And, the \$17 million comprehensive street reconstruction project? It is still budgeted, to begin roughly in the year 2022.

If the story ended there, it would be uplifting: A net gain for property and business owners at Willets Point. But unfortunately, while the City provided those new streets, it also took away a bunch of others.

Recently the City “de-mapped” streets or portions of streets in the vacant Phase One area, removing them from the City’s official map; and physically barricaded them closed. Let’s look at what they closed.

Willets Point Boulevard between Roosevelt Avenue and 127th Street, and two avenues that lead to it; 37th Avenue, the only street that goes directly from 126th Street to the heart of Willets Point; and most of 36th Avenue.

Why did the City do this? Two reasons, they claim: One, they noticed illegal dumping of materials occurring in the streets; and two, the developer is conducting environmental testing on adjacent properties.

Even if it’s true that dumping occurred, the Department of Sanitation is responsible to remove it. It’s not necessary to close the street to traffic. And, traffic on the street would not inhibit any environmental testing that the developer wishes to do nearby.

The negative impacts of all these street closures have been severe.

First, the financial losses.

Businesses located here used to have customer access from several different streets. Now many of them are barricaded closed. That obstructs customers’ access to the businesses, compared to the open access they had before.

Some of these businesses relocated into these very addresses, after leaving the Phase One area, which the City took over and demolished. When they left Phase One, they posted signs like these: “We Move Across the Street”.

They moved here, when these streets were open – and they entered into lease agreements for rent amounts that were feasible when the streets were open. Now the streets are closed, their customers have fallen off, and they find it difficult or impossible to make rent payments. They’re angry about this and looking for recourse.

Some believe that the City is deliberately choking off access to the businesses, so landlords will have problems collecting rent – and thus would rather not continue owning these properties.

Another negative impact of the street closures that was proven recently, is a dangerously long delay in Emergency Medical Services response time.

In July, in the center of Willets Point, a worker was injured when a machine exploded a tire. 9-1-1 was called. According to the caller who timed the response, it took more than 16 minutes for the ambulance to arrive.

The accident occurred here. The ambulance initially approached from Roosevelt Avenue – and was seen hesitating at the intersection with Willets Point Boulevard (one of the closed streets). The ambulance could not enter there. Realizing that, it traveled up to 37th Avenue, but also could not enter there. Instead, the ambulance traveled all the way up 126th Street to Northern Boulevard, then backtracked down Willets Point Boulevard to the site of the emergency.

Before the City closed the streets, the EMS response time here was 6 minutes. Now, it's more than 16 minutes – more than doubled. It's unsafe and unacceptable. (The worker recovered from his injuries.)

Whether the City is actually entitled to close these streets at this time, is dubious.

There is a lack of analysis, in any environmental impact statement, of the likely impacts of closing all of these streets upon businesses that would remain operating, and that had relied on those streets.

And, the approvals to de-map and close these streets were granted to facilitate other versions of the development project – not the one the City is proceeding with, now. So, this seems ripe for a legal challenge, and it wouldn't surprise me if one may be coming.

After all, the people of Willets Point have repeatedly stood against the City sidestepping its responsibilities or lawful procedures, and most of their positions over the years have been vindicated.

And now if I may borrow one of the City's road signs – This is “The End”.

[End.]