

Small businesses at Willets Point demand to be moved en masse, slam city for no relocation plan

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- A group of workers and local advocates rallied at [Willets Point](#) on Tuesday to demand the city come forward with a relocation plan for small businesses in the area.

The 62-acre labyrinth of about 60 auto repair shops, salvage yards and ironworks companies depend on one another to survive, the owners said.

"It's important that these businesses be relocated together," said [Tatiana Bejar](#) of the Human Rights Project of the [Urban Justice Center](#).

The call came after the group released a report that claims the city, in its effort to redevelop the gritty industrial area, was biased against immigrants and minorities.

"The city knows a lot of people here don't have [immigration] papers," said [Pasiana Rodriguez](#), 40, a mechanic at one of the repair shops. "They don't care."

A handful of businesses were shut down in April because of several building code violations.

Different agencies were involved with the closings, such as the Police and Fire departments and the Buildings Department, the group said.

However, after 40 years of not enforcing any building codes in the area, to suddenly close these businesses when the owners were in negotiations to sell the land was "not a coincidence," said [Ted De Barbieri](#) of the Urban Justice Center.

City officials disputed the notion.

"We've been negotiating with property owners and acquiring parcels for about two years, well before and after the alleged actions took place," said [David Lombino](#), spokesman for the city Economic Development Corp., adding the agency had nothing to do with the buildings getting shut down.

The city is still forming a plan to relocate the businesses, Lombino said.

"We're looking at relocating some of the businesses in clusters," said Lombino. "We've done it before."

But many owners said they are wary.

"They never tell us the truth," said [Marco Neira](#), 51, president of the [Willets Point Defense Committee](#), adding that it's been difficult over the 23 years he's been in business to trust promises from city officials.

"The city comes here to give us fines, never to fix our streets," he said. "We have no sewers."

"The city gave us these problems," Neira said.