

Willets Pt. Rallies Under Citi's Shadow

By Vladic Ravich

Critics of the Willets Point redevelopment plan used the Mets season opener to draw attention to their cause, rallying in front of Citi Field on Monday to protest the ongoing relocation efforts in the area.

"The issue today is that the city has allocated hundreds of millions of dollars in low interest financing to build Citi Field, which is great, but in a time of economic crisis to have the city neglect the most vulnerable people in this relocation project is not acceptable to us and the group," said Ted De Barbieri, a fellow at Urban Justice Center, who is working with the Willets Point Defense Committee. The coalition represents about 60 small business owners, each of whom employ an average of five workers.

The group has complained that Cornerstone Realty Group, a company hired by the City to help organize a relocation of the businesses at Willets Point, has not agreed to meet with them.

Marco Neira, the president of the Willets Point Defense Committee and owner of the Master Express Deli, said "They are supposed to help us, but they won't even meet with us. They don't sit down with us. They're planning on relocating us individually, but we need to be moved like a group, like we are here, like a family. But they are thinking of moving us individually."

The demonstrators said they need to know when they are being moved and to where so they can plan accordingly. A spokesman from the New York City Economic Development Corporation said, "We are legally prohibited from engaging in direct negotiations with businesses that are currently under lease with private landlords. However, our relocation consultant, Cornerstone, is talking with every business in the area to keep them informed of our plans."

Another issue involves the job retraining classes being offered to the Willets Point workers at La Guardia Community College. Many of the employees at Willets Point are undocumented immigrants and they face barriers to finding alternative employment.

"It's against the law to hire undocumented workers, but it's not illegal to have undocumented workers working for you," said De Barbieri, "The workers and business owners don't oppose retraining. The premise of the program is the retraining and job placement, but you cannot retrain workers who are not able to work."