

# The Real Deal

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## Willets Point: Home, sweet home plate

Plan may bring housing near new Mets CitiField stadium

By Michael Rudnick



A rendering of the Willets Point plan, which would bring development to a 61-acre industrial area.

Some Queens residents may go to sleep counting home runs in the hot summer under a plan to put residential development just beyond the gates of the New York Mets' new CitiField stadium.

But some critics say residential buildings are not a good fit for this 61-acre plot of land, which lies directly below the flight path to LaGuardia Airport, contending that it is best suited for a mix of retail, hotels, office and recreational buildings.

Current Mets fans are used to aircraft roaring overhead, as are spectators and players at the USTA National Tennis Center. So are the operators of the auto repair shops and scrap yards that now fill up much of the area beyond the stadium and nearby Flushing Meadows-Corona Park.

The Willets Point plan, the capstone of 30 years of development goals, calls for the development of new housing as well as retail, hotel, convention center, entertainment, commercial office, open space, parking, cultural and community facilities. If approved, construction is slated to be completed by 2017.

While the area has long been seen as a challenge for revival, the construction of the new Mets stadium, the continued influx of immigrants to Queens, and a community planning process ignited by the five-year-old Downtown Flushing Task Force made plans for redevelopment more plausible. Mayor Michael Bloomberg added his seal of approval when he announced the major redevelopment plan on May 1. Last month, Robert Lieber, president of the city's Economic Development Corp., put the estimated price tag for the project "north of \$3 billion" during a City Council hearing.

The residential portion of about 5 million square feet is the largest component of the roughly 8-million-square-foot plan, said Bill Walsh, vice president of real estate development at the EDC. The residential component would entail up to 5,500 high-rise, mid-rise, low-rise and possibly townhouse units. The plan could still be aimed at creating a sizable amount of middle-income housing. Walsh said that the site may also include low-income housing, though nothing has been finalized in the early stages of the project.

One challenge is just overhead: flights departing from and arriving at nearby LaGuardia Airport, which present negatives beyond just noise. Walsh said that most of the housing in the plan will be in mid-rise buildings, due to height limitations imposed by LaGuardia flight paths. Still, new housing has already been built within the same LaGuardia flight path in other areas of Flushing.

But John Maltz, president of real estate brokerage Greiner-Maltz, said the flight path issue could turn residential developers and potential residents away. "[Willets Point] is on an extremely noisy flight path to the point where the ground vibrates," he said. "There is a reason why it is scrap yards," he added. Raymond Roubeni, principal at residential Queens developer Astral-Weeks, concurred, saying, "Who knows if it's the best place for residential development? Because of the flight path, it may be difficult to build high." He did not entirely rule out residential development, noting that if it was to occur, the focus should be mid- or low-rise buildings. "It should be something that isn't a sore thumb in that neighborhood," he said, adding that

high-rise apartments would be out of context for Flushing.

Flight noise didn't stop Muss Development Company from starting to build the mixed-use residential/retail Flushing Town Center just across the Flushing River from the proposed Willets Point site, said Mack Tham, director of sales for Flushing at real estate broker Massey Knakal. The development will have roughly 1,100 high-rise units, he added. Muss officials could not be reached by press time.

"We are seeing development; people are more interested in the Western side of the [Flushing] River. A lot of that land in the past was for manufacturing, but it had been changed to commercial [zoning], which can be used for mixed-use," Tham said.

Bring the flight noise, and Flushing residents can handle it, said Shibber Khan, managing principal for Queens residential developer Criterion Group LLC. "Noise has never been an issue in Flushing. [Residents] are not looking for a serene, suburban neighborhood."

He said that flight path noise has not stymied development in the neighboring College Point waterfront area, adding that new units there are selling well.

A continuing influx of Asian immigrants to Flushing means the need for new housing far outweighs flight noise, Khan said. The population of Queens is expected to increase by 15.1 percent between 2000 and 2030, according to the Willets Point Development Plan.

"The proposed actions would permit a substantial amount of housing to be constructed in the District, which would help accommodate future population growth in Queens, and contribute to the city's overall efforts to meet its short- and long-term demand for housing," the plan stated.

"As far as the expansion of Flushing, that Asian population is spilling over into Corona [Queens]," Khan said, explaining that the predominantly Asian residents who inhabit Flushing generally try to stay close to the downtown area to regularly shop at the local Asian markets.

However, Maltz said that retail, hotel and recreational development in Willets Point would prove more profitable than residential use. "It's near Shea [Stadium] and the USTA [National Tennis Center], and there are higher and better land uses than apartments."

While commercial construction could potentially fetch higher price tags, Flushing residential prices have jumped in the past two years. Khan said that residential prices per square foot in downtown Flushing currently range from \$600 to \$800, compared with about \$400 per square foot about two years ago. The escalation has been "driven by the influx of immigrants and new development," he said, adding that historically there has been a lack of "quality [residential] product" in Flushing.

The Willets Point plan may flounder over the lack of adequate public transportation and roads needed to support thousands of new residents, which could undermine Willets Point residential plans rather than any lack of housing in Flushing, said Roubeni. "The infrastructure [there] might not be able to support the additional population."

If the Willets Point residential plan becomes reality, one commonly agreed upon expectation is a focus on owned units over rentals. "This community has an extreme affinity towards ownership rather than rentals," Khan said.

Anthony Carollo, president and owner of brokerage firm Carollo Real Estate, said that the area is ripe for condominium development. "There is a shortage of condos in Queens. That is one of the first steps to ownership. You have to make ownership affordable."