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Council to fight for affordable Willets housing

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Several members of the City Council and community groups pledged to a Corona based organization that they would fight alongside them for more affordable housing in the Willets Point redevelopment plan, they said at the group's latest meeting.

The group, Queens Congregations United for Action (QCUA), demands that the city allots 30 percent of the new development for affordable housing. Currently, the Willets Point plan calls for 20 percent of the housing to be for the poor.

"Twenty percent is not nearly enough for this community to live comfortably," said Richard Lee, an advocacy associate for Asian Americans for Equality, at the June 11 meeting. "That is why we're fighting for one-third low and one-third moderate income housing, to make sure these affordable homes stay affordable."

Councilmembers Helen Sears, Hiram Monserrate, Eric Gioia and John Liu's chief-of-staff John Choe showed their support at QCUA's meeting for more affordable housing, where about 450 people attended, the group estimates.

"I will fight for everything you have in this pledge and I'm with you all the way," said Sears, who represents parts of Jackson Heights, Elmhurst, Rego Park, Woodside and Corona.

"When they first told me about Willets Point two years ago, they told me it would be market rate condos," Monserrate said. "That's really priced out of our community."

Willets Point, according to PlanNYC, is a 13-block area located between Flushing and Corona that consists largely of auto repair shops, junkyards, and other industrial and small businesses.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg's redevelopment plans for the area would add thousands of housing units, new retail and entertainment amenities, a hotel, NYC's first non-Manhattan convention center, office space, open space, parks, playgrounds and a new public school, the NYC Economic Development Corporation said on their website.

"Keep in mind there is no housing currently at Willets Point," an EDC spokesperson said. "The current plan calls for approximately 5,300 units of housing and approximately 1,100 units, or 20 percent, are to be affordable housing. This represents a careful balance between the needs of the community and the estimated costs of development."

Residents of the surrounding neighborhoods of Willets Point, many of whom are immigrants and working class, are worried that the redevelopment plan would exclude them and that the city might displace approximately 1,500 workers, possibly through eminent domain laws, according to QCUA.

"I think the development in Willets Point is unfair," said Florencio Almazo, a resident of Corona who along with his wife shares a basement apartment with two other couples. "It's unfair to people like me. It is unjust that we and families like ours won't qualify for the housing to be built in Willets Point."

The Willets Point redevelopment is currently in the Uniformed Land Use Review Procedure process and on June 30, Community Board 7 will hold a public meeting on the plans. If it passes the board, the plans will proceed to Borough President Helen Marshall's office on July 10.

The Queens Courier

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