

June 13th, 2007

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Firstly, let me introduce myself to you. My name is Ralph St. John. I am the Vice President of St John Enterprises, Inc., which is located on the corner of 127th Place and Northern Blvd. in Corona, **Lot 19, Block 1829**. We have been located at this site for 33 years. I am also a lifetime Queens resident of seventy three years. Our firm, St. John Enterprises, Inc. is a well established and well reputed construction firm. It has been in business for over twenty five years. It is a father and son owned enterprise. We own and operate our own equipment, the inventory of which ranges from small excavators to large dozers, excavators, and dump trucks and trailers. We own our facility and operate our own well outfitted maintenance shop.

In the last two decades, we have been working on bonded projects with such government agencies as the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation and Department of Environmental Protection. As you may well know, these projects include versatile scopes of work and can be high visibility and high profile projects. We have earned an excellent rating as a construction firm with the Dept. of Parks and Recreation, and have been placed on the preferred bidders list for projects requiring extreme sensitivity and versatility of work.

Along with the construction firm, my property on Northern Blvd and 127th Place includes a two story building of approximately 10,000 square feet, and a warehouse with a full basement of approximately another 15,000 square feet. On my building, I have a two sided billboard overlooking the Grand Central and the Van Wyck Expressways. These properties are rented to other companies that have established businesses in this area.

My business and my properties are a culmination of fifty three years of hard work, sacrifices, and risk. I have given everything of myself into this business. It has been a long painstaking endeavor to establish this business and these properties. I remember working day and night for years to better this company and the properties. The hard work and sacrifices are not all mine either. My son has worked with me since he was a teenager. Prior to that, he was strongly recruited by the US Air Force to join the Officers Training Academy as a pilot. He sacrificed the opportunity to help his father and his family in this business. He continues to work with me as a principal of the company now in his mid forties. We also have talented employees who have gone the extra mile on numerous occasions to give what it takes to make a small business strong and viable in today's market.

With the treat of Eminent Domain looming over us, it has caused my son, my employees, my tenants and I a great deal of anxiety and discomfort as to the sustenance of our business and our livelihoods. As a landowning citizen, I cannot see how this action cannot be criminal in this country. The reason for using Eminent Domain in this case is to remove us from our properties so that they may be given to wealthy developers to increase their already vast wealth at the cost of the common, hard working and tax paying citizens like us. Citizens who have strived and endeavored to make an honest living, on the right side of the law in this neglected area. I have been subjected to Eminent Domain once before, when my business and I were ousted from my property in College Point because the City felt that the land could be put to better use. Thirty two years later, nothing has been done with this land till to date.

The politicians and developers claim that Willets Point is a dirty and polluted haven for unscrupulous junk yard owners and chop shops. And that is why it should be taken away and given to wealthy developers who feel that their grand ideas will improve the place for the common person by building high priced hotels and convention center. Yet, the City is at fault for all the gross neglect over the years. Even though we pay sewer taxes, there are no sewers here. Dozens of garbage trucks come in to drop off garbage here but they never collect it from the businesses. The streets are rarely cleaned. The City does not enforce pollution or contamination laws in the area. The roads remain full of potholes and in a state of deterioration and decay. Many areas in Willets Point still have no sidewalks and are barely accessible by foot or by car. All the while, we pay property taxes for these amenities that are taken for granted in most places in the City.

But legitimate businesses strive to maintain and improve the state of our area. My son, my men and I have furnished and installed approximately 6,000 square feet of our own sidewalks and steel faced curbs in front of our place. We have spent tens of thousands of dollars to improve and maintain our properties. We clean up the debris on the street and sidewalk in front of our place. We installed our own drainage systems to collect the falling precipitation. We fill in the potholes in the street. Even though the City has neglected us, we continue to do what is right for the area.

What is more egregious about this situation than the City's neglect for this area is the City's threat to use Eminent Domain to requisition Willets Point from its rightful land owners and businesses. According to the Webster's Dictionary, Eminent Domain is defined as "The dominion of a government over all the property within the state, by which it can appropriate private property for public use, compensation being given to the owner." According to this definition, I see two major flaws in the City's obligations to fulfill the requirements of Eminent Domain. The first flaw, in my view, is that the appropriation of Willets Point is not for the sake of public use, but rather for the purpose of advancing the economic interest of private parties that the City plans to pass the land on to. Most of Willets Point is to be allocated to build market rate housing, high end hotels and a convention center. As the market rate of apartments is well above average in Flushing as opposed to most areas in Queens, the apartments will probably be marketed towards the affluent members of our society

instead of the general population. High end hotels and convention centers are usually marketed towards affluent out-of-towners and big businesses and corporations to market their products to further increase their already large bottom lines. So then, the only way I see that the end result will serve the majority of residents of Queens is job creation for the people to cater to the affluent. But as the City's own records show, Willets Point is already home to 225 businesses and almost two thousand employees. Businesses who serve the public good of the residents of Queens and the City at large, from food distribution to public and private construction, to recycling facilities, to low cost auto mechanic shops and spare parts dealers. In short, instead of serving the public good, Willets Point is being marketed for the rich, by the rich, and to the rich.

The second flaw with the City's plan to use Eminent Domain is the just compensation it intends to provide to the land owners of Willets Point. The City intends to claim this land at a fraction of the real market rate of the area. Secondly, the City has not shown any plan for paying for the established businesses of Willets Point, businesses like many other small businesses in the City, that have consumed investments of life savings and years of hard work and sacrifices by their owners and employees. Thirdly, the City has not shown any plan to relocate these displaced businesses. Let me remind you that businesses in Willets Point are located in the heart of Queens, with access to major thoroughfares, the subway, the LIRR, LaGuardia Airport, and bus routes. Fourthly, the City has not shown any plans for the nearly two thousand displaced workers of Willets Point. Many of these workers and their families are also residents of Queens. No plan has been shown to retrain and procure jobs in areas as accessible as Willets Point to these workers, or to provide any assistance during the unemployment period faced by these workers. If the City cannot fulfill its requirements to enact Eminent Domain, which it clearly has not, it has no legal right to do so.

In closing, I must impress upon you that if the land of the rightful owner can be taken away to be given to the wealthy by the government, it is a shame and an insult to the democracy that we fight for and hold so dear to us. Because it is my land today, it may be yours tomorrow. I ask every law abiding citizen to search their conscience, and ask themselves in what light could this be just. In what light could this be allowable? This decision has a much greater impact than Willets Point and its businesses, or even the City. It directly impacts every land owning citizen who is in the way of big business. Search your conscience and I know that you will reach the proper conclusion as to the future of Willets Point and its people.

Sincerely,

Ralph St. John
St. John Enterprises, Inc.