

September 21, 2012

Queens Triple Play: Willets West, Major League Soccer, and the National Tennis Center



Map provided by the Fairness Coalition of Queens

Three separate proposals impacting Flushing Meadows Corona Park are being advanced independently – but they would cumulatively transform Queens’ flagship park, and the densely-populated neighborhoods of Corona, Flushing, and Elmhurst that surround it.

Economic Development Corporation (EDC) is scoping a Supplemental Environmental Impact Study (SEIS) as the first step toward a major revamping of the Willets Point project approved in 2008. Completion of the 5,850 units of housing that were a key element of the approved plan would be pushed back as far as 2028; meanwhile, the project would be expanded beyond the Willets Point Special Zoning District to include **Willets West**, a new 1.4 million square foot mall, to be constructed on CitiField’s main parking lot, and expected to be completed by 2018. Commercial properties in Willets Point would be demolished to make way for replacement (surface) parking, which the developer (a joint venture between the Related Companies and Sterling Equities, selected last year through a Request for Qualifications/Proposals(/RFP) process) says it would activate with temporary recreational uses during the off-season.

Just across the #7 tracks, **Major League Soccer** (MLS) wants to build a 25,000-seat soccer stadium in Flushing-Meadows Corona Park, as a home field for a new NYC professional soccer team. The proposed site is the Fountain of the Planets, a pool created for the 1963 World’s Fair that is actually a captured section of the Flushing River. MLS had originally proposed the stadium for Pier 40 on Manhattan’s West Side but faced substantial community opposition there.

To the west, the **National Tennis Center** is proposing an expansion that would add over 7,000 new seats, plus luxury suites, retail space, and approximately 700 new parking spaces, as well as reconfiguring roads into and within the site.

Though the three projects are being proposed separately, their sites are contiguous, and they would collectively transform the under-maintained but heavily-used northern half of Queens' flagship park into a car-dependent and largely commercialized "destination" serving a citywide audience. Taken together, the three projects would add approximately 9,000 parking spaces to the park and its surroundings by 2018, with another 4,000+ spaces to be added in later phases of the project. 2,725 of the spaces to be built for the first phase would be on a "temporary" surface lot located on land being acquired in Willets Point. This would displace approximately 60 companies and hundreds of workers, many years before the permanent developments approved as part of the Willets Point project are built.

Local residents are concerned about the thousands of new car trips the projects are likely to induce, as well as about the privatization of parkland. Though project documents state that only 1 acre of parkland land would have to be alienated for the Tennis Center expansion, and 7.5 acres for the MLS stadium, the total area needed to accommodate access routes and other stadium-related activities appears to be larger. And a very large area – most of the northern end of the park, including the nine public soccer fields that MLS says it would refurbish - would be inaccessible to the public during the three- to five-year construction period for the Tennis center and the stadium.

The communities of Elmhurst, Corona, and Flushing are already underprovided with open space, especially space for active recreation for their rapidly growing population. Much of the land officially mapped as parkland is occupied by parkways, buildings, and space leased to private entities. Flushing Meadow Corona Park is cited in public documents as comprising 1,255 acres of land, including Citifield and its parking lots. But analysis by the Fairness Coalition of Queens shows that when non-park spaces are subtracted, only 347 acres are actually open to the public for park uses today.

None of the project descriptions mentions the [Strategic Framework](#) for [Flushing Meadows Corona Park](#), commissioned by the Parks Department and drafted in 2010 by Quennell Rothschild & Partners, with input from park users and other stakeholders. That plan prioritizes improving access to the park from the surrounding communities, from which it is now cut off by major highways, as well as re-naturalizing its waterbodies and enhancing its green spaces. The three projects now being queued up would make it difficult, if not impossible, to achieve these goals; and instead would permanently pave over sizeable additional areas in the park.

Whether it is possible to resolve the many issues these major developments pose, in ways that mitigate traffic and other impacts, deliver good jobs, and improve the park as both a recreational and ecological resource to the dense and growing communities around it is a difficult question, and one that the normal public review processes are unlikely to answer. Each of the projects is being evaluated individually, through separate processes and on uncoordinated timelines, with no recognition of their contiguity and overlapping timeframes. As it stands, the projects' cumulative impacts are unlikely to be recognized and analyzed, much less adequately addressed.

Public actions / processes / timelines:

Scoping hearings for the **National Tennis Center** expansion were held in July 2012; NYC Parks, the lead agency, has not announced its schedule for completion of the EIS, but it is likely to be completed before the end of 2012.

The **Willets West** shopping mall will be examined via a Supplemental Environmental Impact Study now being initiated by the New York City Economic Development Corporation. A **Scoping Hearing** for the SEIS will be held on **September 27**, at **P.S. 19, 98-02 Roosevelt Avenue in Corona**. One session is at 4:30, and a second will begin at 6:30 to better enable local residents to attend. The Mayor's Office of Environmental Coordination will receive comments until October 9. The draft scope and additional information about the SEIS, as well as the 2008 Final Generic Environmental Impact Statement for the original project, are at http://www.nyc.gov/html/oec/html/ceqr/project_willets_point.shtml.

EDC says that the mall project will not require the state legislature's approval for alienation. Citifield and its parking lots sit on parkland, where construction of the original Shea Stadium was authorized by 1961 legislation. A [July 30 article in City Limits](#) explores the alienation question in detail.

To date, no lead agency has been designated for **Major League Soccer's** stadium proposal, and no schedule has been announced for an environmental impact study, or for the introduction of the alienation legislation that would be required.

Who would benefit:

- The Queens Development Group – a joint venture between The Related Companies and Sterling Equities (the real estate arm of the Wilpon family, owners of the Mets) would gain, at no cost, the right to develop what is now a parking lot into what would be the largest shopping mall in Queens.
- Major League Soccer would acquire a new venue that would enable it to expand into the largest US city that does not already have a professional soccer franchise. Terms for payment to the City, if any, have not been publically discussed.
- The United States Tennis Association would gain the right to upgrade and expand its facilities in the park. While the USTA would pay for construction on the Tennis Center itself, New York City would pay for modifications to the access roads.
- MLS is promising rehabilitation of existing soccer fields, wetlands and surrounding park areas, as well as contributing to the construction of new public soccer fields, cricket fields, and volleyball courts.
- The MLS proposal states that local businesses, especially restaurants and bars where fans gather before and after games, have benefitted in other cities where it has built stadiums.
- Soccer has a large and growing fan base that includes many immigrant communities in Queens.

Who would lose:

- Businesses and workers in the Willets Point Special District would be displaced to provide temporary replacement parking – many years before the new housing and schools that were promised as the project's major benefits will be built.
- Tenants of the 1.4 million square foot mall are likely to consist overwhelmingly of national chain stores, whose business models rely on use of low-wage, part-time workers.
- The mall would undermine local retail corridors in the surrounding neighborhoods.
- A total of approximately 100 acres, including 9 existing, heavily-used soccer fields would be unavailable to the public for the duration of the 3- to 5-year construction period.
- The three projects together would require the legal alienation of between 10 and 30 acres of existing parkland, and would pave over many additional acres of existing public green space.
- The combined projects would significantly increase traffic on already-congested local streets and highways. The new ramps proposed for the Van Wyck expressway will connect directly only to future phases of the Willets Point project, and will not be completed until at least 2024.
- The projects would also add to the already severe overcrowding on the #7 line, especially on game and event days.

Big questions:

- Do these projects – individually or collectively – serve the public sufficiently to warrant the disposition of important parcels of public land, and/or subsidy with public funds?
- If a professional soccer stadium is a good idea, is there another location where it could be built without taking over scarce public parkland?
- Is a large new stadium actually viable in this area, when it will be competing for concerts and other events with Citifield? Does the MLS proposal rely upon excessively favorable terms for leasing or acquiring public land?
- Will local fans be able to afford tickets to professional soccer games in the stadium? MLS projects that the lowest-priced individual tickets will cost \$25.
- What is the realistic total cost to the city for infrastructure improvements necessary for all three projects, including the new exit ramps from the Van Wyck Expressway that the city has already committed to paying for?
- Will the promised jobs associated with all three projects offer real opportunity to local residents, including a living wage and benefits?

- Where could replacement park space be developed that would be equivalent in size, quality, and accessibility to the area that would be alienated? Would it be completed and open for public use before existing parkland is taken away?
- What is the impact on public health, especially the health of young people, of taking the existing soccer fields and other active recreational areas offline during the multi-year construction period?
- How will terms agreed to in the public review process be enforced? What mechanisms can be put in place to limit changes to plans agreed to now but executed under future mayoral administrations? What role will the public play in the oversight of any of these projects?

Timeline and milestones:

- Tennis Center: No dates announced for completion of the EIS or for alienation legislation; the latter is likely to be introduced in winter or spring 2013.
- Willets West: EDC will complete scoping very soon after comments are closed on October 9, and is likely to complete the EIS itself before the end of 2012. Actions that would then be required include:
 - Special Permit for parking in the [Special Willets Point District](#), and certification by the Chair of the City Planning Commission of compliance with other provisions of the Special District applicable to large developments (ZR-124-05)
 - Modification of the Citifield lease to allow development of the mall – whether this would require alienation legislation is in dispute
 - Approval by the Mayor and the Queens Borough Board of business terms per City Charter Section 384(b)(4)
 - Approval by the New York City Industrial Development Agency for the waiver of mortgage recording tax for property within the Special Willets Point District
- MLS has given no specifics on a timetable for soccer stadium project, but is currently “in negotiations.” It is likely that scoping for an Environmental Impact Statement will begin this fall, and that a vote by the State legislature on alienation would take place in Spring 2013.

Lead agencies: National Tennis Center – NYC Parks; Willets West – NYC EDC; Major League Soccer Stadium – none designated as of 9/21/12

For more information: <http://www.nycgovparks.org/park-features/fmcp/usta-ntc-strategic-vision-project>; http://www.nyc.gov/html/oec/html/cegr/project_willets_point.shtml; <http://www.mlssoccer.com/>; <http://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/fmcp/>;

Pratt Center contacts: [Elena Conte](#) or [Joan Byron](#)