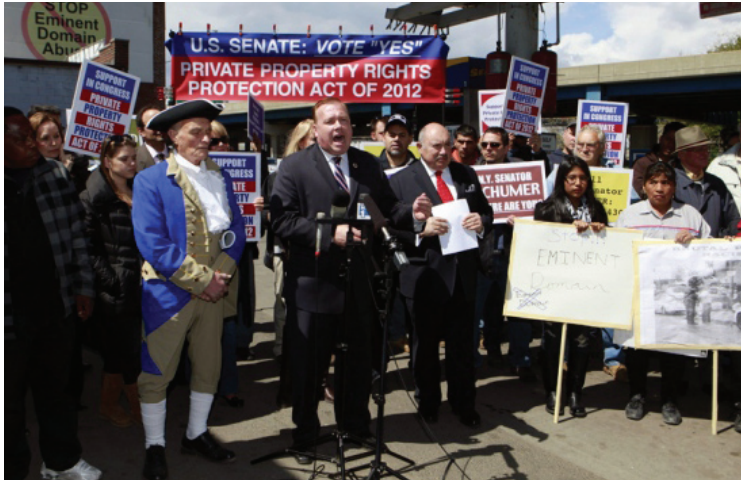


# Willets Point United rallies in support of bill limiting eminent domain use

**'Private Property Rights' act would cut federal funds for using eminent domain for economic development**

BY VERA CHINESE / NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

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Joseph Ardizzone, the only person who actually lives in Willets Point, rallied on Thursday in support of a bill in Congress that would ban federal funds from going to certain eminent domain projects.

Joseph Ardizzone (in costume), City Councilman Dan Halloran (c.) and Willets Point United attorney Michael Rikon rallied on Thursday in support of a bill in Congress that would ban federal funds from going to certain eminent domain projects.

A proposed federal law could hinder the city's bid to revamp Willets Point, business owners there are hoping.

But a city official said the bill, which would discourage municipalities from taking private property for economic development, could also squash future unrelated revitalization projects.

Willets Point United, a vocal group of stakeholders there, has long contended the city's use of eminent domain to take their land for a mixed-use development is unfair and unethical.

"Does this sound like it should be happening in America?" attorney Michael Rikon said to an applauding crowd gathered around him at a Sunoco gas station in Willets Point on Thursday.

The bill, dubbed the "Private Property Rights Protection Act of 2012," would cut federal funding to government agencies that use their power of eminent domain for economic development — putting the city's plans for Willets Point in jeopardy. Eminent domain was traditionally used for public projects such as hospitals and schools, but the U.S. Supreme Court has taken a more sweeping interpretation of what constitutes a "public" project.

The group wants U.S. Sens. Chuck Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand to support the bill, which was approved by the U.S. House of Representatives on Feb. 28, but is pending Senate approval.

The act would also prohibit the federal government from using eminent domain for economic development.

City attorneys said the city is not seeking federal money for the Willets Point plan, but the law could discourage it from moving forward because the city could lose out on future money.

"If this bill were to become law, important revitalization projects, such as the ones that gave new life to Times Square, MetroTech and Lincoln Center, wouldn't be possible and it would also jeopardize the long-sought redevelopment of Willets Point," said Lisa Bova-Hiatt, an attorney with the city Law Department.

Meanwhile, a similar bill is making its way through the state legislature, said state Sen. Tony Avella, a Willets Point United supporter.

Willets Point United members said they would welcome the new law.

Ralph St. John, 78, a general contractor whose headquarters is in Willets Point, was kicked out of his College Point building 38 years ago when the city took it through eminent domain.

He didn't fight the city then, but has joined the battle to stop a takeover this time around. He demanded he and his fellow business owner be given a choice as to whether or not to sell their land.

"Get your check book, come over here and pay us what [the property] is worth," he said. "And stop torturing us."