

Into the frying pan

Business owners at thriving Bronx market face eviction if they refuse package as city plans shopping center

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At the Bronx Terminal Market yesterday, Salvatore Paolillo stood next to his tomatoes and vented at the city's plans for a shopping center built by a developer with close ties to the Bloomberg administration.

"The crooked politicians, that's what's wrong with this city," said Paolillo, 75, who has run Sal's Produce at the 70-year-old food market in the shadow of Yankee Stadium for 20 years. "Who's gonna lose is the poor people."

Paolillo and 22 other business owners are facing a March 31 deadline to either agree to a city relocation package or face eviction to make way for the shopping mall developed by Steven Ross' Related Companies.

Newsday reported yesterday that the city's deal with Ross' firm is loaded with millions of dollars in government subsidies and tax breaks. Ross and Deputy Mayor Dan Doctoroff are former business partners, and Ross has been a major supporter of the city's Olympic bid - an effort that Doctoroff founded.

Needless to say, the Bronx deal has raised a few eyebrows.

"I can't recall there ever being a deal this sweet," said Rep. Anthony Weiner (D-Queens), who is running for mayor. "It's essentially risk-free for Related."

The city has offered tenants \$10 a square foot, plus \$3 million in interest-free loans, and \$1 million in rent credits.

"We take this as a very fair and even generous offer to help those businesses relocate," EDC spokesman Michael Sherman said.

While the tenants touted as many as 900 employees, a city official put the total at closer to 250.

Tenants said the city package doesn't account for the true value of each business. Nor does it account for the fact that some businesses have spent millions on refrigeration and other equipment.

"The city has taken care of Related, but done nothing to protect the businesses," said Richard Lipsky, a lobbyist who has been critical of previous city-Related deals.

There is no plan, tenants said, to move all the businesses to the same place, which could cripple some operations. "We want to remain together as a viable market," said Stanley Meyer, who runs a meat and fish business. "It's really one-stop shopping."

Or as Paolillo said yesterday: "If I go by myself to sell tomatoes, no one's going to come just to buy tomatoes. We need the whole bunch of us together."

Felicia Okoro, owner of the African Market, is not only coping with the relocation, but with the loss of her husband, John, slain in December outside the terminal market.

"We made this place together," said Okoro, a native of Nigeria. "If I have to move, it will take awhile to build up our business again."

"They are not offering to relocate the market, so really they are not giving you anything," said Manny Sanchez of New York Produce.

As Sanchez spoke, workers and customers bustled past with cases of fresh ginger from China, sliced cactus ears, exotic varieties of chile peppers from Mexico and organic mangos from Haiti.

"If you come here on a Saturday, you'll see the action," he said. "It's really alive."