

THE NEW YORK TIMES, THURSDAY, OCTOBER 4, 2001

Up the Creek in the Bronx

Fulton Fish Market Unhappy in Its New Home

By CHARLIE LeDUFF

The thing about fish is that it's got to be sold today. This is both a natural and an economic law.

This universal truth is being pleaded by fishmongers at the Fulton Fish Market, who, because of the World Trade Center attack, are no longer mongering

fish from their open-air stalls in southern Manhattan, but rather from a desolate and filthy parking lot in the South Bronx.

The market, it seems, created traffic problems. So its relocation went into effect Sept. 15 on the order of Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani.

"When the semis and forklifts are op-

erating and fish is being sold outdoors, South Street is shut down," said Janel Patterson, a spokeswoman for the city's Economic Development Corporation. "We need that street for the relief effort."

The move has brought impending bankruptcies, layoffs of workers, worries of a spoiled seafood supply and struggles for the neighborhood around the South Street Seaport, the merchants said.

The market is currently at 600 Food Center Drive in the Hunts Point Market site, the Bronx. It is sandwiched between the meat cooperative and the littered banks of the Bronx River. It leans like a shantytown against the old Hebrew National Foods warehouse. The names of the fish purveyors are spray-painted on the building. Just across an access road is a polluted brownfield and a dumping ground for batteries, house paints and other toxic materials.

"It's a horror story," said Joe Centrone, a cantankerous cigar-stained salesman for Arrow Seafood, who is known around the market as Joe Tuna. "We're getting slaughtered. None of the customers can find us up here, and even if they could, this ain't the nicest neighborhood in New York."

To make matters worse, the square footage of the temporary market is one-third the space of the Fulton Fish Mar-



A refrigerated truck at the Fulton Fish Market, now relocated to Hunts Point in the Bronx. The temporary market has only one-third the space of the old site.

ket. The 1,200 forklifts, trucks and vans must jockey for available space among the narrow aisles and roads while avoiding the customers and workmen pushing handcarts. The merchandise is piled so haphazardly that the salesmen find it difficult to remember what fish they have in stock.

The 59 wholesale operators find themselves working in the elements, without computers or cash registers, with nothing to shield them from the rain and wind. The sleet of December is on everyone's mind.

Since the move to the Bronx, merchants estimate that volume is down 40 to 50 percent. The market normally moves 100,000 boxes of produce a week, which translates into a \$1 billion annual industry for New York City. But many say that business is now so poor that they don't think they can last another month in the current situation.

"It's a temporary home with no end in sight," said Vincent Tatick, president of the Joseph H. Carter

CITY_21MC100_011830642

Fish Company. "The city thinks they're helping us. But over all this location is killing us. If we can get back home, we want to get back home yesterday."

The wholesalers were scheduled to move to a new location in the Bronx in 2003, but construction on that project will not begin until later this fall, city officials said. For now, they will have to endure the parking lot.

"We've got no problem with the temporary move," said Tony Cirillo, president of Local 359 of the United Food and Commercial Workers, the union that represents the 400 journeymen and salesmen at the fish stalls. "We're Americans and we want to do our part. But enough is enough. The New York Stock Exchange is back open for business, for Pete's sake. How about us?"

Because business is so bad, Mr. Cirillo said, 50 of his men have been laid off and more job losses are expected next week.

"These are good jobs," he said. "This whole thing has a negative

Yet another aftershock: South Street is needed 'for the relief effort.'

trickle-down on families and the city."

Some people at the market say Mayor Giuliani is using a national emergency to punish them for their long-running resistance to his authority. Mr. Giuliani effectively crushed the influence of organized crime at the Fulton Fish Market in the mid-1990's, requiring licensing and background checks on workers, which forced more than a dozen companies out of business.

City officials say the move is nothing more than an emergency measure to keep the fish market, the larg-

est in the United States, solvent, and that every effort is being made to get the Fulton Fish Market back up and running.

"There was no electricity or telephones and Lower Manhattan was immobilized," Ms. Patterson said. "At this point, South Street is an artery needed for the relief effort, and it's hard to say when we'll be able to move them back."

The market operates like an open-air auction house, except there are no barkers and no tote boards to reflect supply and demand. Prices are set by the individual consignees and are determined by a strange combination of weather reports, fishermen's gossip and the prices at the neighboring stalls.

The men still come to work at midnight, as they have for a century. Their language is rough and blasphemous. But many buyers, who come from as far away as South Jersey and northern Connecticut, are going to the Philadelphia and Boston mar-

kets rather than take their chances in the Bronx during the dark morning hours, the salesmen said.

Judging by the sanitary conditions of the temporary fish house, one cannot blame them. The quarters are wretched. Rodent droppings line the walls. Exhaust fumes from the forklifts mingle with the fish. The floors are a slop of mud and oil.

The few toilets are filthy, and there are only a few hoses to wash down the entire 50,000 square feet of indoor cooler and storage space. The equipment at the temporary market includes 20 diesel trucks used for refrigeration, 15 portable spotlights and a handful of outhouses. One truck recently malfunctioned and \$13,000 worth of seafood was lost overnight.

A city official who works with the market seemed content with the cleanliness of the Hunts Point location, saying the area is power-washed daily and the garbage is picked up.

"Have you ever seen Fulton Market?" the official said. "It always looks filthy at the end of the selling day."

There is also the economic health of the old neighborhood to consider. Carmine's restaurant, at Front and Beekman Streets, and a favorite of market hands, has lost most of its food business, the owner reports.

Then there is Annie, a pillar of the Fulton Fish Market. She earns a meager living selling newspapers and socks and cigarettes. She has no pension. What happened to Annie, the men asked yesterday morning.

Around 4 a.m., she arrived by car service. They were glad to see her until someone figured it out.

"Annie's here?" he said. "Oh, God. That means we're here to stay."

You can order
The Times Book Review
by mail.
A great gift idea!

CITY_21MC100_011830643