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Booker is bullish on Newark's future

Mayor trumpets citywide development

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Despite the downturn in the economy and forecasts of a national recession, Mayor Cory Booker said yesterday Newark is poised for a slew of development projects that are expected to touch all corners of the state's largest city.

Delivering his second State of the City address at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, Booker said businesses and developers are showing a renewed interest in Newark. He ticked off a number of projects, including a four-star hotel, a children's museum and an incubator for high-tech businesses.

"Despite our slowing economy, we are opening up the doors and inviting development that truly boosts our communities and reflects our values," Booker said.

The mayor capped his speech, which at one hour was 45 minutes shorter than his address last year, by saying, "I believe, I believe, I believe in Newark."

The annual address, which typically offers residents a snapshot of the city's welfare, was held away from City Hall for the first time. Officials said they changed venues because the Victoria Theatre in NJPAC is larger than the council chambers and it saved the city money.

Booker's address was preceded by an 8-minute video highlighting the mayor and his accomplishments. He then opened his remarks by focusing on the city's two most vulnerable populations: senior citizens and children. He announced a pilot program called Grandparents Parenting Grandchildren, which will offer support to low-income grandparents. He also challenged every resident to become a mentor.

Booker applauded Police Director Garry McCarthy, saying his brilliant efforts have led to a drop in crime. According to Booker, shootings dropped by 22 percent last year compared with 2006. Booker has spent part of the last two months riding along with police officers during night patrol.

He criticized residents for not calling tip lines and helping police solve crimes.

"The true threat to our city is not a small group of violent criminals, but the apathy and indifference of countless citizens who refuse to stand up for their neighborhoods and their cities."

The mayor also announced the city is building two police precincts, a recreation center and, taking a cue from Essex County Executive Joseph DiVincenzo, unveiled a \$40 million park renovation program called Green Spaces. The city is spending \$19 million of its money for the facelifts, while the rest of the money is coming from private donors.

One of those donors is Leon G. Cooperman, the founder of Omega Advisors Inc., a \$3.5 billion hedge fund based in New York City. Cooperman and his family are donating \$5 million. He was in the audience last night as one of the invited guests of the city.

DiVincenzo said he was glad the mayor spoke more about parks and said park maintenance was long overdue. "It should've been done 30 years ago, and the parks are in disarray," DiVincenzo said.

But Booker devoted most of his address to projects that have been signed with developers.

"Not only are we getting Newark corporations to hire more locally, not only are we focusing on those people often left out of the work force, but we are also succeeding in drawing new development to our city, which means hundreds and hundreds of brand new jobs," Booker said.

The projects range from the smaller grass-roots ones, such as a new Subway sandwich franchise opened by Weequahic High School football coach Al-Tarik White, to larger ones, such as a new distribution center at the former Coca-Cola/Arts & Metal site on Delancey Street.

The city also hopes developers will break ground this year on a four-star hotel, a 72-unit condominium project known as The Richardson, and welcome the Children's Museum of Central New Jersey, all within the Prudential Center arena zone.

Albert Telsey, co-president of the Children's Museum of New Jersey, said his museum will complement the Newark Museum, Symphony Hall and the Museum of African American Music.

"It's got that sizzle," Telsey said. "It's where it's happening and that's where we want to be."

The hotel will be located near Mulberry Street and Edison Place. The exact location of the museum has not yet been announced, but a warehouse owned by Edison Properties is one likely location.

Jerome Gottesman of Edison Properties, the developer of the hotel, has been negotiating with Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide.

"The arena's tremendously successful opening has created momentum that will be carried forward," Booker said, citing the hotel and the condominium project, which will include affordable housing.

One of those projects will be along the city's port area, which Newark planning officials say is under-used, but embodies the city's geographical assets as a transportation hub.

Bo Farkas, vice president of development for AMB Property Corp., said he is optimistic the port area will flourish in the near future. AMB is completing construction on a 191,000-square-foot distribution center that will produce 75 to 200 jobs.

The deal was initiated while former Mayor Sharpe James was still in office.

"We knew real estate prices would grow at the port," Farkas said. "We are really excited about the port and the new administration."

Jim Burns, managing partner of Genova Burns & Vernoia, said he moved the law firm's headquarters from Roseland to Newark because it identifies with the city's aspirations.

"We think the city is undergoing a renaissance in the business community," Burns said. "Practically speaking, it's a dream to have a location where our clients can get around on mass transit."

In addition to those projects, the mayor said ground will be broken on a Digital Century Center at University Heights Science Park -- which is expected to serve as an incubator for technology companies.

Booker's sweeping address on the city's development is the most comprehensive since the mayor took office more than 18 months ago. A crop of building projects came to a halt in 2006 when Booker, as a candidate, challenged the city's land sales under the James administration. The former administration sold city-owned parcels for \$1 to \$4 per square foot.

James is awaiting trial on some of those deals.

Booker's lawsuit, however, froze all sales of city land at discounted rates. At the end of last year, the mayor's office finally unveiled its long-awaited land disposition policy. Among other things, the city is asking developers to offer more affordable housing, use environmentally friendly materials and employ union workers.

The city also is focusing on pushing affordable and work force housing. The city recently teamed up with a New York-based real estate investment firm to offer discounted rent to teachers, police and firefighters. The firm, Apollo Real Estate Advisors, purchased 724 new units in the city's Weequahic section, but fewer than 25 were actually vacant.

"No longer are we going to give land away," Booker said. "We are opening doors and inviting development that truly benefits our community and reflects our values."