

## Mayor Cory Booker to focus on Newark economic development, empowerment

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Newark Mayor Cory Booker's third state-of-the-city address tonight envisions a 24-hour downtown with 700 additional housing units in two high-rises and an added Seton Hall Law School dorm, the city's first recreational boat dock in half a century, and the state's first community court for low-level offenders.

Amid a major recession, Booker plans to announce that his staff will focus on the city's economic development and economic empowerment of its residents.



Mike Derer/APNewark Mayor

Cory Booker

"A lot of our values are being incorporated into this," the mayor insisted when he previewed the hopeful but sobering plan at The Star-Ledger last week. Booker will give the annual address at 6:30 p.m. at Newark Symphony Hall. Free tickets are available at the box office, and the speech will be broadcast on the city's cable channel 78.

Last year's address touched on similar issues, including downtown development plans, which will be expanded upon in tonight's address. But this year, there will be caveats because of the worsening economy. Newark's unemployment rate has risen to 10 percent since Booker became mayor in 2006, and the city had the 35th-highest number of foreclosures out of 100 U.S. cities in 2008, according to RealtyTrac, a California firm tracking the market. Several hotel chains have already scrapped plans this year to build in the city.

"Now, we have one or two competing at best, still moving this economy," Booker said. "These are some signs a lot of the major projects we thought we were going to get going have slowed up or frozen up completely."

The city also faces critical financial shortfalls, and to fill them Booker said all options are on the table this year, except layoffs. A priority is replacing nonrenewable funding, including a one-time settlement

with the Port Authority over payments for Newark Liberty International Airport. He said that money dries up by 2011.

The economic stimulus package pending in Congress could end up being a boon for Newark. But Booker said the city also must aggressively boost revenue, including fees, parking and payroll taxes.

To stem rising costs, the mayor wants to reduce fuel expenses, perform energy audits and drop car allowances for city employees. He is considering replacing hard-wired telephone lines in city offices with cell phones and won't rule out offering city services to other towns.

City officials also believe Newark could become a city of opportunity in hard times for companies unable to locate to more expensive towns.

A state tax credit program to stimulate development in the city would provide necessary income for downtown development. The Urban Transit Hub Tax Credit was designed for development planned near freight-train lines and Newark's light rail, Booker said. A new "revenue allocation district," which would provide funding from private developers, also would subsidize development in downtown. But Booker's new downtown could take up to three years to materialize, he said, and if the economy worsens, even longer.

The largest project, a high-rise by Dranoff Properties with more than 300 affordable and market-rate units, was mentioned in last year's state of the city address. However, business professionals recently considered it to be downtown's top priority. The mayor tonight is expected to say the project is a go, along with a second residential high-rise, with 150 units, proposed by a developer partnered with basketball star and Newark native Shaquille O'Neal.

In addition, the Seton Hall dormitory planned for Mulberry Street will include 250 housing units.

O'Neal and his partners at the Boraie O'Neal Urban Development Project also are proceeding with a plan to save the struggling Newark Screens movie complex on Springfield Avenue. Part of the nonprofit theater, which operates on city-owned property, will be demolished for an expansion that will have new entertainment venues and the city's first eat-in cinema, said Stefan Pryor, deputy mayor of economic development.

City officials said they also expect to use state Green Acres and urban enterprise zone funds for a waterfront park in the Ironbound. The 2- to 3-acre park east of Newark Penn Station will include the city's first recreational boat dock on the Passaic River in 50 years.

In addition, Booker is expected to describe a variety of services to assist residents, including the state's first community court, which will permit residents to decide the disposition of minor offenders, the mayor said.

A big push will be made to economically empower residents, too, including an expansion of assistance available to people who call the city's nonemergency telephone line.

Booker said he also will continue to encourage philanthropy, like the recent \$2 million in grants made by Oprah Winfrey to Newark nonprofit groups, schools and organizations.

"We're doing a lot of things we believe are innovative, or very aggressive for our city," he said, "to try and directly empower our residents, financially and economically."