

Parks & Recreation

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Urban Champions

Mayors on the Value of Parks in Their Cities

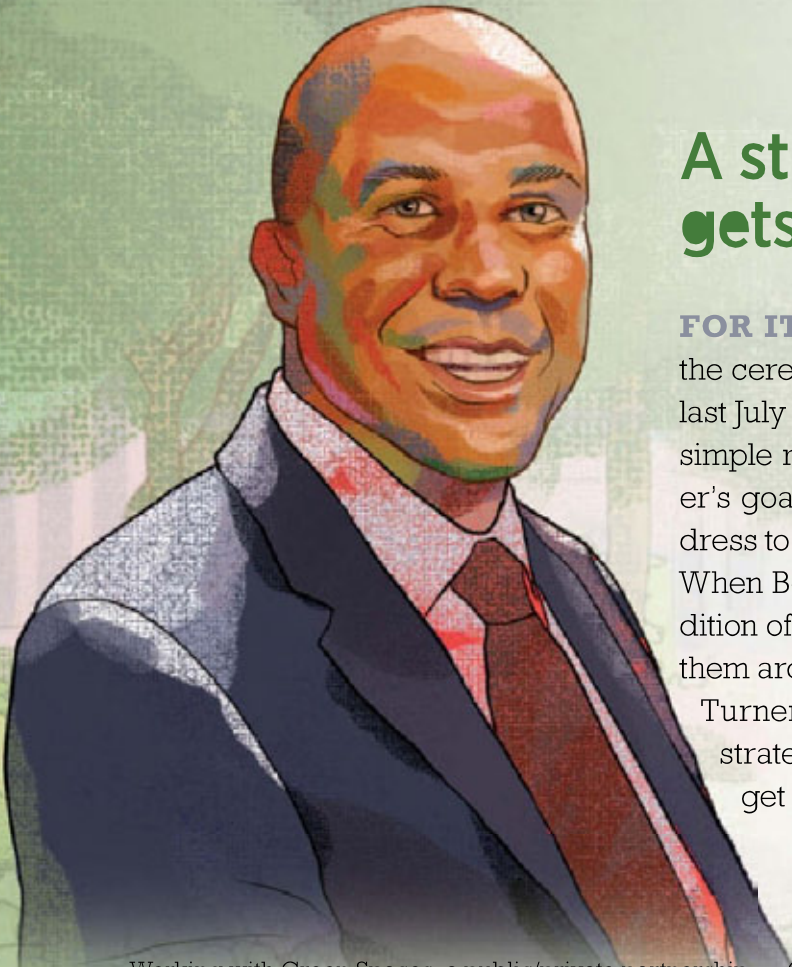
Mayors Cory Booker, Newark;
Richard Daley, Chicago;
Antonio Villariagosa, Los Angeles

Funding for Livable Communities

Religious Symbols for Parks

Lighting Trends for Sports Facilities

TURNING THE TIDE



A struggling park system gets a huge boost

FOR ITS YOUNG, NEWLY ELECTED MAYOR, the ceremony marking the opening of Nat Turner Park last July in Newark, New Jersey, was much more than a simple ribbon cutting. Instead, it reflected Cory Booker's goal set out in his inaugural State of the City Address to expand and rehabilitate the city's park system. When Booker took office in 2006, the dilapidated condition of Newark's parks was no secret, though turning them around was the unknown. But development of Nat Turner Park illustrated Booker's evolving signature strategy of building public-private partnerships to get things done in Newark.

Working with Green Spaces, a public/private partnership, and the Trust for Public Land, Booker has committed \$40 million for the parks initiative. To date, in addition to Nat Turner, Newark has completed new parks and fields at St. Peter's Park, Boys Park, First Street, and Thomas Silk Parks, and two athletic fields. Working with Newark Public Schools, the city has built an athletic complex at Weequahic High School. By the end of this year the city expects to have completed 20 new or enhanced parks. At nine-acres, though, Nat Turner Park is the largest city-owned park Newark.

"More than 30 years ago, in the wake of disorder, when so many people were leaving Newark and giving up, there were people here in the Newark community who were not giving up, who were standing up," Booker said at the opening of Nat Turner. "They called to keep this land preserved so that one day, this park would be possible. They saw this land become a dumping ground, but never let anyone dump on their dreams."

The Central Ward residents had never seen anybody like Booker. He came into office well aware of the challenges facing the city's revitalization. The country's third oldest city

(population 240,000) and a former industrial powerhouse, Newark slid into the dark ages in the 1970s. With civil unrest in the 1970s, residents flowed out of the city. Crime increased, educational achievement plummeted, and poverty soared. Nearly 25 percent of Newark families fell below the poverty line, and in 1996 *Time* magazine declared Newark "the most dangerous city in the nation." Corruption was rampant—five of the last seven majors were indicted on criminal charges, including Booker's predecessor, Sharpe James.

It was against this backdrop that Booker won election to the Mayor's office. Even before he took office, it was clear that it would not be business as usual. An African-American born to parents who were pioneering minority executives at IBM, Booker earned degrees at Stanford University (B.A. political science, M.A. sociology), Oxford University (Rhodes Scholar with an honors degree in modern history), and Yale University (J.D. law). At Stanford and Yale, Booker was unusually active in community service. It was during his final year at Yale that he moved to Newark to get involved in community affairs.

As a council member in 1999, Booker went on a 10-day hunger strike to protest open-air drug markets and violence.

Nat Turner Park in Newark's Central Ward on its opening day.



CORY BOOKER/ FLICKR

**City of Newark Parks
Mehdi Mohammadish
Director of Engineering**

CITY OF NEWARK
39 acres of parks/40 city parks and squares largest are Nat Turner Park, 9 acres
Jesse Allen Park, 8 acres
Military Park, 6 acres
Lincoln Park, 4.1 acres
Washington Park, 3.3 acres.
4 outdoor swimming pools
1 indoor pool
2 ice skating rinks
5 recreation centers
71 board of education centers and playgrounds
Essex County:
756 acres/ 7 parks—Branch Brook, Weequahic, West Side, Vailsbur, Ivy Hill, Independence, Riverbank.

His legislative efforts to improve housing, law and order, and youth development, however, fell short each time with votes of 1-8. As a mayoral candidate he drew the enmity of the Bloods gang which failed in an attempt on his life. Two years later, Newark's crime rate had dropped to its lowest in 50 years.

Key to Booker's meteoric success is his charismatic ability to cultivate donors inside and outside the Newark city limits. For parks, the Trust for Public Land established an office in Newark to help in fundraising and design of new and rehabbed parks. Booker befriended hedge fund entrepreneurs with portfolios in the billions of dollars who have pledged substantial sums for park and education programs. Private entities, such as the Home Depot Foundation, have contributed to recent park openings. Much help has come from philanthropic organizations, such as the Victoria Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Until Booker's administration, Newark had never had an urban planner on its staff. That changed when the city announced plans to redevelop its Passaic River waterfront, not for the first time. Damon Rich came on board to help plan what will be its most ambitious parks project. It will be done in stages and, when complete, will allow residents to walk to and cycle from their various neighborhoods.

"This is still a place where industry happens, and it's a place where there is a tremendous amount of under-utilized land," Rich says. "My job is to figure out how it can better benefit the city and the people who come here to live."

"We have been working with the Trust for Public Land and Essex County to design and permit the first riverfront park in the City of Newark," Rich continues. "We expect to begin construction this year."

Rich says the riverfront can really be thought of as "a new front yard for Newark."

The city has tried in the past to revitalize its waterfront. They failed, Rich believes, because they "amenities subordinated to a larger attempt to draw sizable development."

"The lesson that we took away is that we actually want to lead with some public amenities," Rich says. "We really want to think about the waterfront as an amenity to the entire city. That's why we're leading with the park project."

Even the early stages of the project reflect Booker's strategy of partnership building. The city secured over \$3 million in funding from the Urban Enterprise Zone and the New Jersey Green Acres Program to fund the first phase of construction. The New Jersey Department of Transportation I BOAT NJ program and New York/New Jersey Baykeeper have provided \$152,000 for construction of a public floating dock, the first of its kind to be built in Newark in a century.

Development of the site will begin with environmental remediation of the former industrial parcels, followed by the creation of park facilities, including a public access floating dock, a riverfront trail, and new plantings. The project will be enhanced with improved pedestrian connections to the surrounding Ironbound (East Ward) neighborhood. The park will also include the first portion of the Joseph G. Minish Riverfront Trail, a long-term project to create a pedestrian promenade along the length of the Passaic River in Newark.

"Newark's historic riverfront has long been the victim of public neglect and environmental abuse," Booker says. "Now we are re-connecting our residents with this waterfront, providing them with an open space for recreation and enjoyment, while adding green spaces to our city. Through this partnership we will have a riverfront that is worthy of Newark's greatness." 