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Mayor Booker Favored, but Newark Is in No Mood to Celebrate This Year

By RICHARD PÉREZ-PEÑA
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NEWARK — Inside the soaring [New Jersey Performing Arts Center](#), it was theater of the kind politicians crave. Days before facing re-election, Mayor [Cory A. Booker](#) and other luminaries announced a deal to build a 44-story apartment tower, bringing jobs and residents to this troubled city.



Tom White for The New York Times
Mayor Cory A. Booker of Newark last week at the unveiling of plans for an apartment building. Newark's Election Day is Tuesday.

Outside, it was a different sort of scene last week, with pedestrians strolling by in the heat, most of them unaware that the election is Tuesday.

"That's coming up?" asked Toni Jackson, a 36-year-old store clerk. As for Mr. Booker and the Municipal Council, whose members are also on the ballot, Ms. Jackson said she liked them well enough, but she could cite just one achievement: "Crime is better."

Eight years ago, it was a "[Street Fight](#)," the title of an acclaimed documentary about Mr. Booker's unsuccessful run against the longtime mayor, [Sharpe James](#). Four years ago, it was more like a coronation, as Mr. Booker — a darling of the press, reformers and business groups — won 72 percent of the vote, and the candidates he endorsed made a clean sweep of Council seats.

This year's elections have drawn far less interest, and Mr. Booker, 41, has largely ignored his three underfinanced challengers, but the stakes are no less high. Despite some progress, Newark remains pocked with vacant lots and empty storefronts, and continues to suffer from poverty, unemployment and crime.

Mr. Booker is still the energetic youngster, full of optimism and eloquence — "Newark has stood up and said, 'We will be a light unto the darkness, we will be the hope amidst despair,'" he declared at a recent appearance — and political analysts say there is little doubt that he will win.

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Councilman Carlos M. Gonzalez is running for re-election as a member of the Booker team, but there is spirited opposition.

But in a low-turnout election, some Council incumbents, all of them backed by the mayor, might be vulnerable, and the mayor's margin of victory could be much smaller than in 2006.

"If Booker lost, it would be a huge upset, and I don't think anyone expects that," said John

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Weingart, associate director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at [Rutgers University](#). “Beyond that, it’s hard to predict. There are clearly people in Newark who remain loyal to the old power structure, but no one knows how many.”

An unimpressive showing by Mr. Booker and his team could make it harder to govern and tarnish his image — and hurt his chances if, as is widely expected, he seeks statewide office some day.

The challengers in Tuesday’s nonpartisan election — all the major candidates are Democrats — include a slate with strong ties to the old guard and to Mr. James, who was the mayor for 20 years. He declined to run again in 2006, and went to prison in 2008 after his conviction on fraud charges.

The opposition ticket’s mayoral candidate, Clifford J. Minor, is a former judge and former Essex County prosecutor who was in the crowd that greeted and cheered Mr. James last month [when he returned from prison](#) to Newark to serve out his sentence in a halfway house. One of that slate’s Council candidates is John Sharpe James, the former mayor’s son.

“This election isn’t about my father,” the younger Mr. James, a former Army major, said in an interview. He said the former mayor was not allowed to receive phone calls, and had offered very little guidance to the challengers.

Mr. Booker’s critics challenge the official statistics showing reduced crime, and they question his fiscal management. But much of the criticism is aimed at painting him as an aloof outsider, just as when he was a challenger, and Mr. James used Mr. Booker’s suburban childhood and degrees from Stanford, Oxford and Yale against him.

Since taking office, Mr. Booker has appointed many officials who do not live in the city. He hired a police director, Garry F. McCarthy, and a deputy mayor, Stefan Pryor, who are white and had previously worked in New York City — a risky move in a majority-black city.

“He hires people from outside of Newark,” Mr. Minor said last week in a candidates’ forum.

John James dismissed Mr. Booker as “a big celebrity going around the country,” while in Newark, “people have to go through layers of other people to get to him.”

Mr. Booker originally embraced a part of the outsider image, campaigning as an antidote to an often corrupt political culture. As mayor, he tightened ethics rules and swept out many of Mr. James’s appointees.

But in office, the lines between reformer and establishment blur quickly. A former deputy mayor under Mr. Booker, [Ronald Salahuddin, was indicted](#) this year on extortion and bribery charges. Council members and political advisers who were once allied with Mr. James have switched sides and become members of Mr. Booker’s team, at least for now.

A longtime Booker antagonist was Stephen N. Aduato Sr., one of the city’s major power brokers. But [they achieved a truce](#) last year, after Mr. Booker helped arrange a \$500,000 gift by [Oprah Winfrey](#) to a [charter school](#) founded by Mr. Aduato.

In previous campaigns, Mr. Booker said he could change the tattered image of this city of 280,000 people, and attract corporate investment. He can point to a number of big projects, including new housing and a new hotel, but most of those are not yet under way.

“I thought Newark’s trajectory would be far higher at this point,” he conceded in an interview, blaming the recession and a weak real estate market. “We may have gone from running on an Olympic track to running on a beach in knee-deep water, but the reality is we’re still making forward progress.”

Gerald Krovatin, a prominent lawyer in Newark, said that in the business community, “there’s still a lot of optimism out there about Booker, but also a sense of a job not yet fulfilled.”

The Newark police say that crime in 2009 was down 21 percent from 2006, and the decline is often cited as Mr. Booker’s primary achievement. He increased the size of the police force and

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invested in technology like surveillance cameras and sonic gunshot detectors.

But the mayor says he is most proud of less-noticed things, like turning some 20 vacant lots into parks, cleaning other lots to prepare them for development, and creating programs to aid newly released prisoners. High on his list for a second term, he said, is wresting control of the Newark school system from the state.

“I’m not the kind of guy who wants to have my ship rot in the harbor,” he said. “I’d rather be sunk at sea than be timid.”

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