



The New Newark

An Interview with The Honorable Cory A. Booker, Mayor of Newark

EDITORS' NOTE Cory Booker took the oath of office as Mayor of New Jersey's largest city in July 2006 and was reelected to a second term in May 2010. His political career began in 1998, after serving as Staff Attorney for the Urban Justice Center in Newark. Booker rose to prominence as Newark's Central Ward Councilman and served from 1998 to 2002. In April of 2011, TIME named Mayor Cory A. Booker to the 2011 TIME 100, the magazine's annual list of the 100 most influential people in the world. The list, now in its eighth year, recognizes the activism, innovation, and achievement of the world's most influential individuals. He is a member of Democrats for Education Reform, Columbia University Teachers' College Board of Trustees, and the Black Alliance for Educational Options. Booker received his B.A. and M.A. from Stanford University, a B.A. in Modern History at Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar, and completed his law degree at Yale University.



The Hon. Cory A. Booker

We knew we had an uphill battle and we had to be creative about re-messaging and repositioning our city, and we were able to do that in fun ways. Whether it's through a social media presence that is in the millions now or through traditional media, we want to make sure we rebrand our city and more people come to the understanding that Newark is not only changing, but it's one of the more exciting up-and-coming cities in America.

What initiatives do you have in place to create jobs in Newark and are you happy with the impact you've had in that area?

We still face a very high unemployment rate and that is frustrating.

However, this year we're going to have a groundbreaking on projects that are going to bring literally thousands of jobs to the city of Newark. Whether it's all the construction jobs in building the new hotel, building the teacher's village, building a new movie theater, or building the Panasonic building, there is a significant infusion of jobs in Newark.

So we started doing things that added up quickly to thousands of construction jobs and from 1,000 to 2,000 permanent jobs.

Why is it proving so difficult to reform the education system?

It is the greatest national security challenge we have, because our long-term strength in a global knowledge-based economy will ultimately be how well we're preparing our young people for 21st century jobs.

There is not an employment problem in high-tech jobs that necessitate engineering and science degrees, for example – there is a dearth of qualified people for these jobs. America often has to look outside of its own borders to find people who can fulfill them.

So the real problem in America relative to long-term sustained economic growth and to maintaining our global leadership position is going to be based on how well we meet the challenge of education.

There is concern that we haven't been able to tackle this problem yet. But you go to any challenged urban environment and there are schools that take kids from difficult backgrounds and educate them at high levels.

So where America has failed is not in our ability to show that every one of our children

can learn; it's our ability to take these islands of excellence and make them into a larger hemisphere of hope.

How critical has it been to build that public/private partnership that engages business leaders in addressing the issues?

I have a city with great private sector partners that are involved with me on everything from crime-fighting to education. The private sector in Newark is partnering with the government to help us do some pretty incredible things. But every day, you have to continue to get out there and talk to people.

Do you worry that what it takes today to be in public service will discourage top talent from entering the public realm in the future?

I do worry about that. Our public leaders make a lot of sacrifice for privacy. But America has been made strong by people who were willing to make sacrifices.

There are structural changes we need to make in our democracy so we select leaders who reflect our values. The way our political system is designed, through the primary system, through gerrymandering of political districts that drives political elected leaders to the margins as opposed to what I call the sensible center, we often end up with people who are representing more radical viewpoints as opposed to where most Americans are in the common ground that is necessary for compromise and progress.

Have you been happy with your relationship at the state level with Governor Christie and the way he has reached out to the key cities and mayors in addressing his agenda?

I celebrate his leadership in the sense that I have a strong partner on issues of core importance for the success of my city. He and I are partnering on education, on bringing Panasonic here, and on the bread-and-butter issues for people in Newark.

He has to make a lot of tough calls because Governors – Republicans and Democrats in the past – have refused to make them. We have had a tremendous amount of fiscal irresponsibility in our state over the past few decades. There is no easy way out of the predicament we're in.

So even though he and I are in different parties, he's willing to look for common ground to work with me. I don't want to downplay our disagreements, but I love that I can get on the phone anytime with a straight-shooting Governor who is oriented towards problem solving and not politics. ●

When it has to do with changing an entire culture, how do you work towards building the type of change that is necessary in Newark?

Every day, you remain steadfast in hitting singles and doubles, and eventually, you see yourself really far ahead in the game. And that is what the past five years have been about for Newark.

After we attracted one or two companies, we started gaining momentum and we've seen an inflow of businesses in our city like never before with the first new hotel and the first new office tower being built in our downtown area in 40 years.

We've transformed the landscape of our city with over 40 acres of new parks and recreation facilities. It didn't happen overnight, but we began right away with a new recreation center pocket park; next thing, we were working on a nine-acre park and more.

It's the same thing with affordable housing. We've more than doubled the production of affordable housing with partnerships to create new models for affordable housing with everybody from Brad Pitt to Bon Jovi to Oprah Winfrey.

Is it challenging to get the message out about the business opportunities in Newark?