



Frank H. Conlon/The Star-Ledger

Newark's Boys Park, on Sussex Avenue in the shadow of Route 280 and Garden Spires, is a prime example of neglect in the city's park system.

Across the street from the Sussex House shelter, the park is surrounded by busted chain-link fencing with trash piled in one corner and high weeds and dead grass. A small baseball diamond is spray-painted on the one patch of cleared concrete.

Crews work at Nat Turner Park on 18th Avenue, where a city partnership with the Trust for Public Land will mean a new football field, track and skate park, expected to be finished by this time next year.

"That's supposed to be a park?" asked Keyonna Louis, 29, a resident of Sussex House who was sitting on the steps one humid afternoon trying to stay cool. "I wish it was. It would be better than sitting right here. I could come out and get some air. It would beautify the neighborhood."

Mayor Cory Booker won't even call it a park.

"It was designated on a map as a city park," Booker said, "but it was a dump -

literally a dump."

But that will soon change as part of the city's most ambitious parks plan in 40 years. The \$28.8 million plan calls for gut renovating and sprucing up 21 parks throughout the city before the end of 2009.

Nearly 45 percent of the money is being raised through private philanthropy, a symbol of Booker's national celebrity that has made him a frequent campaigner for presumptive Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama. The Trust for Public Lands, alone, is providing \$5.4 million for these projects.

"Any connection I have, I'm trying to get a park out of a person," Booker said.

Unlike some of Booker's more intangible initiatives undertaken in his first two years in office - such as updating the city's technology, bolstering ethics laws and fixing the city's broke budget process - the parks project is something that residents can see and touch.

It's a tried-and-true way for politicians to leave a legacy.

Essex County Executive Joseph DiVincenzo, who has embarked on a \$150 million plan to renovate Essex County's parks, thinks Booker is doing the right thing. DiVincenzo said his efforts have brought him good will in the community.

"This is what the people can see. This is what they care about," DiVincenzo said. "The economy the way it is, people can't afford to go away so we have to make their backyards nice," he said.

East Ward Councilman Augusto Amador, who constantly hears from residents in his crowded, industrial community about green space, said the parks plan will help Booker tremendously.



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Teens toss around a football at St. Peter's Park while a youngster enjoys the slide at

the playground.

"When this administration came in expectations rose dramatically. Unless you make physical improvements people may not really feel change is taking place," said Amador.

Other politicians understand that. Longtime Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley has won praise for his development of Millennium Park and his efforts to improve the city from an environmental standpoint.

"Parks are kind of difficult to argue with. Parks tend to have diverse constituents. They're used by people with young children, they're used by senior citizens. They're also used by people in the work force," said Montclair State University political science professor Brigid Harrison.

Booker said the proudest moment of his term so far was the renovation and reopening of St. Peter's Park in the city's South Ward.

"Just to see the reaction when the kids came over and saw the baseball field," said Booker. "To have parents there giving testimony that they wouldn't let their kids play there 10 years ago, 20 years ago, because it was considered so dangerous, and for it to look like it does now is pretty impressive," Booker said.

Near Nat Turner Park in the city's Central Ward, it was welcome news that a \$6 million renovation in partnership with the Trust For Public Land will see a new football field, track and skate park finished by this time next year.

Pauline James, 37, who grew up in the Weequahic section, said the city's parks were in such disrepair when she was younger.

"There wasn't a shortage, I believe they weren't maintained," she said. James said swings were falling off and basketball hoops were knocked down. Nat Turner Park would be great for the neighborhood because it would sweep children off the streets, said James.

Harrison said parks in urban areas have enjoyed a flush of cash in recent years thanks to federal grant programs. The downfall, though, is if that money disappears, parks can "deteriorate and become magnets for homeless populations, drug dealers, teenage gangs."

That was the fear of Demitra Bacon, 42, a teacher who has lived in the

Central Ward for more than 20 years.

"I don't know if a park would change the neighborhood. A park would be nice and ideal, but are people going to utilize the park?" Bacon asked while sitting at the outdoor pool at the Hayes Recreation Center. "Or is the park going to be a new haven for drug dealers?"

City officials said part of the goal is to partner with groups to make sure they have a stake in the parks that are being renovated. A \$500,000 maintenance fund is also part of the park upgrades.

"I see parks that are underutilized, not working to their full potential and being occupied by people not there for recreation," said city architect Robert Dooley, Jr. "Once you put this in place the parks will be used the way they should be used.

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Posted by **doctorphil** on [07/27/08 at 10:30AM](#)

How about doing something for Military Park?

There are TEN TREES, all in a row, along the Broad Street side between Cedar and West Park Streets that are all DEAD. It is a disgrace how the Booker administration has allow this nearly 350 year old park which dates to the city's founding to deteriorate.

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Posted by **Njitalia** on [07/27/08 at 11:23AM](#)

drphil, you are a joke. This is a very positive article about Newark, Booker, and new parks. This could help the city a lot, the kids need new baseball fields, football fields, soccer fields, etc. There will be new parks all over the city by 2009, and you pick one park that has dead trees. And it's Booker's fault that this park looks this way, and noone else's fault in 350 years? That is a very old park. This is a joke and so are your posts. What did Sharpe James do for the park, or any parks in the city?

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