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## **Newark's Mayor Cory Booker at Midpoint**

**By RICHARD E. BENFIELD**

Cory Booker, the mayor of Newark, says he does not think about it that way, but there must be easier ways to make a mark in the world than by trying to turn around a troubled city.

Mr. Booker is faced right now, today with rampant crime, punishing property taxes and a burdensome legacy of municipal corruption.

Expectations were high when he came to office, not only because he was an attractive personality but also because his predecessor seemed incurably corrupt. His success depends partly on meeting these expectations. Judging by a recent interview in his spacious City Hall office, in which he exuded a sense of confident serenity, he thinks he can do so. But he says the job has turned out to be every bit as hard as he expected.

Mr. Booker reached the midpoint of his first four-year term today too soon to achieve the ambitious goals he set for himself, but not too soon for his constituents to grumble about his mistakes.

And there have been mistakes. In one particularly embarrassing episode, he failed to back up the highly regarded official he brought in to reform the police department at a critical moment when the official's prestige was on the line. And too often Mr. Booker leaves political details to

**his underlings, who botch them.**

On balance, though, his achievements have outweighed his lapses. According to the city's police department, crime is down. There were 25 murders in Newark the first five and a half months of this year compared with 46 for the same period in 2006. Over all, shootings are also down. Much of this can be attributed to the transfer of hundreds of police officers to nighttime duty (often against their wishes) since Mr. Booker took office.

The mayor has also begun an intensive campaign, patterned after New York's, for private investment for parks; some 20 new or refurbished parks are scheduled to be completed by the end of his first term, giving youngsters and adults an alternative to Newark's gray, gritty streets. There have been no major scandals involving his people, a significant relief for a city where politicians and their cronies assumed that election to office entitled them to cash in. Property taxes have been stabilized.

Mr. Booker has eased city rules to allow for more housing downtown. He has attracted money from the Gates and other foundations for new charter schools, and he is working hard to bring in new business, despite the bad economy. The results of these efforts will not be seen for some time, but they are worthwhile nonetheless.

As to Mr. Booker's personal standing, the results are mixed. He is popular among liberals outside the city and has support from the city's growing Hispanic population, the emerging white and black entrepreneurs who have opened restaurants and small businesses and the Ironbound section of town, which has Portuguese roots.

But he has yet to change the perception of longtime black residents, those who turn out in high numbers for local elections, that he is an outsider. He tried recently to get his people elected to

several ward and district-leader positions and failed miserably.

Some of his supporters fear this may augur poorly for his re-election chances in 2010; and while Mr. Booker insisted in the interview that he would seek re-election and, if successful, serve out a second term, some fear that he will become discouraged and perhaps even leave for a position in a Barack Obama administration.

His troubles with the old-timers lie at least partly with their fear that the city is changing and that Mr. Booker is speeding the process along. And that he is. Some cranes are already on the city's horizon, and Mr. Booker promises many more. The Prudential Center, which Mr. Booker initially opposed, has been highly successful. New residents, especially Hispanics, are continuing to move in.

Newark will become a different city whether or not Mr. Booker stays on. But Mr. Booker is the energizer and catalyst who can direct the change in a positive way. Newark has needed someone to do exactly that for a very long time.

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