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Newark development emerging along Passaic River

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NEWARK, N.J.

A crew on Tuesday cleared overgrown brush from a chain-link fence, topped with razor wire, that now keeps pedestrians a few football fields away from the Passaic River as it snakes alongside New Jersey's largest city.

The Passaic was once the backbone of commerce in Newark's industrial heyday, but the 18-mile river became isolated in recent decades as factories closed and water pollution became evident.

As new office towers and a new professional hockey arena glitter downtown, Newark's riverfront is another sign of hope in a city that is trying to shake its reputation as a hotbed of high crime and poverty. An ambitious project to create a park with a 2.2-mile riverside walkway connecting the vibrant Ironbound section to downtown's towers and arts center is again under way, and planners envision an accompanying private development that includes housing, shopping and offices.

Construction equipment has returned, bolstering the river's shore with steel bulkheading to prevent erosion. Officials are to gather Wednesday at the site to celebrate the ongoing work, but the project _ first authorized in 1990 _ will continue to struggle amid uncertain funding, and no one can say when riverfront strolls might begin.

The waterfront is just steps from a bustling rail and bus hub, Penn Station, and would be readily accessible to thousands of office workers as well as residents of the Ironbound, a Brazilian and Portuguese enclave.

Despite having obtained about \$24 million in federal money to date, the first phase will require at least \$13 million more to complete, according to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which is overseeing the project. As in the past, the latest budget submitted by President Bush contains no money for the work, and lawmakers say they will fight for funding.

"By securing this money and redeveloping our waterfront, we can spur development and our economy, and provide Newark's families with a beautiful park to enjoy. I'll continue fighting for resources we need to revitalize the Newark waterfront," said Sen. Frank Lautenberg, D-N.J.

The entire park and walkway project includes riverbank and wetlands restoration and is now projected to cost nearly \$80 million. About 75 percent would come from federal funds, 19 percent from the state, and 6 percent from Newark, the city has said.

The work is separate from a cleanup of the Passaic River, whose entire 18 miles are heavily polluted and designated a federal Superfund site. Environmental officials last month announced that \$80 million will be spent to remove mud contaminated with a Vietnam-era pollutant from a small portion of the river in Newark, with studies continuing on other sections.

Parks are scarce in New Jersey's largest city. It has just 3.1 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents, about half the amount found in other high-density cities, according to the Trust for Public Land, a nonprofit conservation group.

"I have great ambitions for that park," Mayor Cory A. Booker said Tuesday. The project got \$2.95 million in federal funds for the fiscal year that ends in September.

"For us to get the federal support is very exciting," said Booker, halfway through his first term, who made Newark's redevelopment a centerpiece of his campaign.

Booker also made crime reduction one of his priorities, and murders declined in 2007 and are currently below last year's pace. Yet the first anniversary of a gruesome triple homicide of three college students will be in August, and that event gave Newark unwanted notoriety.

The groundbreaking for the riverfront park _ formally called the Joseph G. Minish Passaic River Waterfront and Historic Area _ took place in 1999 under Booker's predecessor, Mayor Sharpe James.

Now facing a federal prison term following a corruption conviction, James remade much of the city's skyline during his 20 years as mayor. High-rise housing towers that were often hubs of gang activity were razed in favor of new townhomes. Office towers sprouted downtown, along with the New Jersey Performing Arts Center and the Seton Hall School of Law. An arena for the NHL's New Jersey Devils opened in the fall.

But only modest progress has been made for Minish park, named for a former congressman, mostly hundreds of yards of steel bulkheading to prevent erosion when the river runs high.

Booker will be joined along the river Wednesday by Lautenberg and Rep. Albio Sires, another Democratic lawmaker who supports the project.

The private portion of the redevelopment is being handled by the Matrix Development Group, of Cranbury. The company has "solid interest" from potential tenants of a 14-story building planned for part of its eight acres, said leasing manager Felicia Arias. No groundbreaking has been scheduled.

New Jersey's largest law firm, McCarter & English, had planned to move several blocks to that building but has since decided to stay in its current offices, firm spokesman Fred Rackmil said Tuesday.

A park seemed appealing to city worker Dwayne Freeman, 49, who was raking the cut foliage at the site Tuesday.

"Yeah, it would help Newark," he said.

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Associated Press writer David Porter in Newark contributed to this story.

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On the Net:

Minish Park information:

<http://www.nan.usace.army.mil/business/prjlinks/flooding/minish/inde x.htm>

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