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Serving up hope in Newark

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The intersection of Frelinghuy sen Avenue and Forster Street in Newark's South Ward is a mix of dilapidated industrial buildings, fast-food restaurants, and the sprawl of the Seth Boyden housing projects.

Far removed from any transportation or commercial hub, the neighborhood has long been devoid of commercial investment.

Yesterday morning, however, city officials were on hand to open a new Subway restaurant owned and managed by Weequahic football coach Altarik White.

The eatery is located in a brand- new strip mall built on a former industrial building by Westrock Development of Yonkers and funded by the Brick City Economic Development Corp.

In his State of the City address this February, Newark Mayor Cory Booker touted White's franchise as a cornerstone of his economic development plans to encourage local investment and get national corporations to team up with Newark entrepreneurs.

"What we have here is a courageous, enterprising entrepreneur from our community," said Booker. "He's creating wealth within our neighborhoods; he's creating a model of excellence."

At the podium, White singled out his business as a healthy and affordable alternative to the greasy fare sold at nearby restaurants.

"You don't have to eat hamburgers and chicken all the time," said White. "You can enjoy a healthy meal at a low price."

Flanked by his four children, White paused for breath several times as tears of joy coursed down his face.

"I've got every rushing record in New Jersey state football and I can't even do this," White laughed as he wiped his eyes.

The project was funded in part by a \$191,500 loan from the City National Bank and the Brick City Economic Development Corp.'s "Grow Newark" fund.

Headed by Darryl Gates, the Brick City EDC provides financing to small minority- and women- owned businesses that would not be able to meet traditional eligibility requirements to obtain small- business bank loans.

A Family Dollar discount store and a Laundromat occupy the other storefronts in the Frelinghuy sen Avenue strip mall.

"This is the way to create a strong city," said Gates, an alumni of West Side High School, which succeeded Weequahic High School as state football champions this year. Gates could not pass up the opportunity to rub West Side's vic tory in, as White smiled.

A crowd of neighborhood residents attracted by the unusual fan fare mulled over the implications of the new eatery.

Ed Stewart, a West Ward resident, called the Subway a "much needed" development headed by an admirable man.

"He's someone to be proud of, a local boy making good," Stewart said. "We needed something like this to get the ball rolling."

Others were skeptical about the development.

"In 44 years of living in this area, I've never seen anything like this round here," said Jeffrey Brookings, who lives in the Seth Boyden homes. Citing rumors that the housing complex will be emptied and torn down, Brookings opined that the strip mall was not really intended for residents. "This is for the airport workers, probably," Brookings said.

Councilman Oscar James II, who represents the South Ward, lauded White for creating job opportunities for Newark residents. "This is the story we all dream of," James said. "If we do more of this, we can turn this city around."

The Seth Boyden houses are considered among the most dangerous housing projects in the city. In November, a 9-year-old boy was shot and wounded on Thanksgiving Eve while buying eggs for his mother. In October, a drug dealer and member of the Brick City Bloods was sentenced to 30 years in jail for shooting two police officers at the complex in 2005.

When asked if he was concerned about safety, White said that bringing quality food to underserved, impoverished Newarkers superseded any unease on his part when selecting a location.

"(The crime rate) doesn't matter to me -- I told Subway I want to do this in the community," White said, citing his own upbringing in rough Newark neighborhoods. "Who's to say these people don't deserve good food?"

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