

# NJPAC breaks ground on project designed to transform arts campus

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Billionaire philanthropist [Leon Cooperman](#) spent a lot on the hat he was wearing with the NJPAC logo.

“I’m at a stage in my life where I’m swapping money for apparel,” Cooperman, 81, a former [Goldman Sachs](#) partner and [Omega Advisors](#) founder, said Wednesday at a groundbreaking for what New Jersey Performing Arts Center officials called a “transformative” project in Newark that will include an arts education center with his name on it. “This hat cost me twenty million.”

Cooperman joined fellow Goldman Sachs alumnus Gov. Phil Murphy, Newark Mayor Ras J. Baraka, NJPAC CEO John Schreiber, and other public officials and

business leaders in scooping a shovel full of ceremonial dirt piled in a parking lot where the Cooperman Family Arts Education and Community Center is to be built.

The Cooperman Center, a 53,000-square-foot contemporary structure designed by the Weiss/Manfredi architectural firm, will be just one component of a \$336 million mixed-use development on the 12-acre redevelopment area anchored by NJPAC's red brick concert hall and event space overlooking a bend in the Passaic River in the state's largest city. The overall project's projected completion date is fall 2027.

Other components will include a 350-unit, 24-story apartment tower with 10,500 square feet of office space and another 12,600 square feet for retail. In compliance with Newark's zoning ordinance, 70 of the units, or 20%, will be for tenants with low or moderate incomes. The tower, known as ArtSide and designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, will be at the southeast corner of Center and Mulberry streets, along a reopened block of Mulberry that was closed when the arts center was built three decades ago.

The arts center itself will also undergo updates and a redesign of its southern facade along Mulberry, which is now a loading area but will get a pedestrian-friendly facelift for the block's reopening.





“Today we are celebrating the first major expansion of our campus since we opened our doors in 1997,” said Schreiber, now in his 14th “season” as CEO. “Today we make good on our promise to be an effective, useful, engaged and intentional anchor cultural institution, right here, committed to Newark in its ongoing equitable and inclusive development.”

NJPAC has become recognized as one of the largest and [most far-reaching arts centers in the nation](#), attracting artists and events ranging from Yo-Yo Ma to *America’s Got Talent*, providing educational programs that reach tens of thousands of students a year, and hosting hundreds of free concerts and events annually in surrounding communities.

NJPAC’s opening in 27 years ago helped drive [downtown Newark’s renaissance](#) in recent decades. Consistent with one of its founding missions, to spur local economic growth, the arts center has become a property developer, with projects that include One Theater Square, a 24-story apartment tower completed in 2018 with 245 apartments and 30,000 square feet of restaurant and retail space, which was said to be Newark’s first new residential high-rise since the city’s [violent civil unrest of 1967](#).

Leading Wednesday’s event, Schreiber thanked dozens of public officials, corporate executives, board members and other NJPAC donors, and arts center staffers. He recalled the “[Mount Rushmore of NJPAC](#)”: Gov. Thomas Kean, who conceived of an arts center in Newark as an economic engine for the state’s largest city; former Mayor Sharpe James, an early supporter; philanthropist and Newark native Ray Chambers; and Schreiber’s predecessor, NJPAC founding CEO Lawrence Goldman, the only one of the four on hand Wednesday.



In turn, the arts center's current CEO was thanked just as profusely.

"Thank god for John Schreiber," said Baraka, who praised his commitment to equity and diversity in the arts center's programming and programs. Among other things, Baraka praised the development project's plans for memorials commemorating a cemetery for enslaved Africans and their descendants that once occupied the NJPAC property, and the Lenni Lenape indigenous people who had lived on the site before that.

"The streets of Newark have always been steeped in the arts," said Baraka, a [spoken word artist](#) and a [2025 gubernatorial candidate](#). "This is a city where jazz and hip hop are in the breeze, and every wall without a mural is just a canvas no one's yet claimed."

The governor said he and his wife, Tammy Murphy, "cannot wait to see this campus come to life."

As more than 20 speakers spoke and spoke in the lot across the street from NJPAC, workers worked on a new plaza directly in front of the arts center. Jazz and African drum music punctuated the start and end of Wednesday's event.

Apart from the \$20 million gift from Cooperman and his wife, Toby, financing for the project includes millions more in individual and corporate contributions, and [\\$200 million in state tax credits](#) approved by the New Jersey Economic Development Authority in February. The tax credits are through the [EDA's Aspire program](#), created under the 2020 New Jersey Economic Recovery Act authored by State Sen. Teresa Ruíz, D-Essex, the Senate Majority Leader, and Assemblywoman Eliana Pinton Marin, D-Essex, both of whom were on hand Wednesday.

Newark City Councilwoman LaMonica McIver made what is likely to be one of her last appearances as a member of the local ruling body, with [her win in Wednesday's special election](#) to succeed the late U.S. Rep. Donald Payne Jr. representing New Jersey's overwhelmingly Democratic 10th Congressional District. McIver recalled something Baraka once told her about events like Wednesday's, which are welcome markers of a project's initiation, but pale in comparison to its completion.