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For 3 days, Downtown tells all who'll listen: Check us out

By Jason Fink Journal staff writer

JERSEY CITY—Hoping to draw attention to the retail stores and restaurants in Downtown Jersey City, a coalition of neighborhood groups and businesses are teaming up to sell the area to daytime workers, new residents and anyone else who happens to be passing through.

Capping off a three-day "Celebrate Historic Downtown" festival today, centered on the area near the Grove Street PATH station, officials have been organizing outdoor events such as a live band and sidewalk tables selling food and other wares. In an appearance Thursday, Mayor Glenn D. Cunningham worked the crowd along Newark Avenue as the sun began to set on a brilliant late spring day.

"You need things like this, mini-attractions from time to time," Cunningham said Thursday shortly before he addressed an impromptu crowd on Christopher Columbus

Drive where a local band played dance music. "We want to make this not only a good place to work but a flavorful community."

In an area that has seen many new businesses open over the past few years, particularly near the waterfront, just east of where the Rico Tumbao band played outside 95 Columbus Drive, local officials are trying to find ways to integrate the commercial development into the fabric of the neighborhood.

"If you get the office workers out on the street, they see things they don't see from their office windows," Cunningham said.

Among those things are the businesses that fall within the Historic Downtown Special Improvement District, which range from mom-and-pop restaurants to electronics stores to delicatessens to fast-food establishments like McDonald's and Burger King.

"Most of these people commute in and then turn around and go home," said Pete Klapper, who has owned Hudson Camera on Newark Avenue for 30 years, referring to the estimated 4,000 employees who have come to the area during the past several years.

According to Klapper, whose father owned the same store before him, the neighborhood, just a stone's throw from City Hall, has

gone through a series of ups and downs in the past few decades.

"This was a great neighborhood, then it was a war zone, and now it's back," he said.

Appearances by groups such as the Downtown SID, ProArts, the Harsimus Cove Association, the Puerto Rican Association for Community Organization (PACO) and others, the three-day festival has been marked not only by music but also by local businesses selling their goods on the sidewalks under lampposts festooned with balloons.

Mack-Cali Realty of Cranford, one of the waterfront's biggest developers, supplied electricity

and some of the security, and allowed the band to play on the property of 95 Columbus, which it manages.

"It's good for people who enjoy it," said Andy, who works for Pershing at 95 Columbus and declined to give his last name. "We have a cafeteria in our building, but when you get a nice day like this, 90 percent of the people leave the building for lunch."

Although he said he could do without the street music, people like Andy are exactly who merchants and neighborhood groups hope to lure out, to explore the street life around them.

"There's more people today," said Tushar Pattani, a sales manager at Action Office Supplies on Newark Avenue who was selling cellular phones from a table outside his store. "They should do this more often. It makes the city come alive."



Mayor Glenn Cunningham introduces the Rico Tumbao band at the "Celebrate Historic Downtown" festival. The festival, sponsored by Historic Downtown District, was a consortium of community organizations and businesses to celebrate the district's diversity with residents and day-time workers.

