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## New hope for Journal Square agency

By JASON FINK Journal staff writer

JERSEY CITY—After months of financial squabbles and deep personnel cuts that almost forced it out of business, the Journal Square Restoration Corp. is trying to get back on its feet.

With a new director, a much — trimmed debt load and a proposed \$1.7 million budget for fiscal 2003 — \$400,000 larger than last year's budget — the Restoration Corp., a management entity set up by the Journal Square Special Improvement District in Jersey City, is poised to slowly reclaim some of the responsibilities it had before its near collapse earlier this year.

When all 30 of the Restoration Corp.'s maintenance and security workers were laid off in February because the debt-ridden agency could no longer make payroll, the pedestrian plaza that forms the centerpiece of the Square's revitalization became noticeably dirtier.

The city dispatched employees from the Incinerator Authority and inmates from the Hudson County jail to help sweep up and the nonprofit Ready, Willing and Able also pitched in, but most observers are hoping for a more permanent solution.

The Restoration Corp.'s new director, Don Smartt, has said maintenance will now be done by an outside contractor rather than employees of the agency, but he could not divulge who it would be or when they would start. Some officials say Ready, Willing and Able may get the permanent contract.

Several kinks remain to be ironed out with the budget proposal and not everyone is completely satisfied with the plan. But the bitter dispute between the agency and the Jersey City Economic Development Corp. that paralyzed operations and resulted in the layoffs and the resignation of the former director has been mostly smoothed over, officials in both camps say.

On Tuesday, Restoration Corp. officials will meet to approve the budget, which will then be sent to the EDC — which is charged with disbursing state Urban Enterprise Zone funds as a match for revenue raised through special SID taxes — and to the City Council.

Both the EDC and the Restoration Corp. have agreed in principle to \$600,000 in matching funds from the UEZ coffers.

The organization will also ask the City Council to approve an expansion of the SID to include two blocks of Newark Avenue, between Tonnelle Avenue and Kennedy Boulevard, a move that officials say will raise an additional \$80,000 in SID taxes.

Despite the general agreement, the CEO of the EDC, Marialyce Fitzgerald, said certain budgeted expenses, such as marketing costs, would have to be picked up with SID tax revenue and not paid for with UEZ money.

Administration and management costs are listed as \$364,500. About \$240,000 of that will be for management fees and salaries, more than the \$208,000 spent for those purposes under the previous director, Brian Coleman, officials said.

Fitzgerald did add, however, that she did not expect such differences to hold up an agreement between the two agencies.

Ward C Councilman Steve Lipski, who represents Journal Square, praised the progress of the budget talks — as well as the Restoration Corp.'s swift reduction of its \$500,000 debt — but said sanitation and security concerns needed to be addressed by the city.

It is not clear when, if ever, the Restoration Corp. will contract for security services the way it plans to do for maintenance, and Lipski called on the Police Department to beef up its presence in the area.

"I would never want my wife walking (alone) through Journal Square," Lipski said, recalling a recent walk through the area after dark. "It looked like a combination of 'Night of the Living Dead' and the bar

scene from 'Star Wars' . . . It was scary."

A spokesman for Mayor Glenn D. Cunningham said a beat cop is assigned to the Square every night and three are assigned during the day shift. There is also a mini-precinct on Kennedy Boulevard, directly across the street from the PATH station.

"Any security concerns should be brought to the police's attention immediately," said the spokesman, Stan H. Eason.

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**The Community Advocates have assisted The Journal Square agency in trimming the inherited debt and preparing the \$1.7 budget for 2003 in less than four months.**

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Don Smartt and The Community Advocates