

Bon Jovi wants to help N.J.'s middle class 'LIVIN' ON A PRAYER'

MICHAEL L. DIAMOND
@MDIAMONDAPP

NEWARK — With rock-star Jon Bon Jovi lending his support, Philip Murphy on Monday launched a group that will try to rebuild New Jersey's middle class.

New Start New Jersey's backers honed in on the importance of investing in education and lowering the state's high cost of living. But Murphy, a Middletown resident and former U.S. ambassador to Germany for the administration of President Barack Obama, admitted that those traditional prescriptions will be tough, given the state's shaky budget.

"Because of the budget realities, a lot of what I think is going to have to get done ... realistically, pragmatically, is going to be outside the official government channels," Murphy said after the announcement.

Murphy introduced the group at the New Jersey Institute of Technology in front of a high-profile crowd that included former Govs. Thomas H. Kean and Brendan Byrne — and lots of left-leaning policymakers and analysts. It will be a nonprofit, and Murphy and his wife, Tammy, will fund it, at least at the start.

In doing so, he jumped into an issue that is plaguing the state: How do you rebuild a middle class that has been decimated by globalization, technology and a recession?

More jobs needed

New Jersey has felt the brunt. While the U.S. has regained all of the jobs that it lost during the Great Recession, New Jersey is less than halfway back. Pharmaceutical companies and casinos that once could be counted on for well-paying jobs have downsized and fled to other states. And the cost of living only continues to rise.

A survey released Monday by the group found less than a third of New Jerseyans think their children will be better off than they are. It echoed previous research. Rutgers University-Newark professor Stephanie Hoopes Halpin, in a study released in September by the United Way of Northern New Jersey, found nearly 40 percent of New Jersey households can't afford basic necessities.

Halpin called those workers "ALICE" — short for asset limited, income restrained, employed. And she asked Bon Jovi if he would write a song about them.

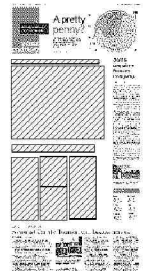
"It's called 'Livin' on a Prayer,'" Bon Jovi, a Middletown resident, quipped, referring to a song released 28 years ago about a blue-collar couple that was down on its luck.

The underlying struggles in that song — Tommy, who lost his union job, Gina, who works in a diner — have only grown more acute. A recent Asbury Park Press series found New Jerseyans making \$1 million or more were the only ones who saw income gains from 2010 to 2012. And seven of the 10 occupations that lost the most jobs from 2000 to 2013 had median wages between \$30,000 and \$60,000 a year.

New Start New Jersey didn't come without political chatter. Murphy has been mentioned as a Democratic candidate for governor, and the event had many of the trappings of a campaign — glowing introduction from his wife, pledge to restore New Jersey to its rightful place, introduction of dignitaries and a panel discussion moderated by Murphy himself.

But Murphy dismissed the notion that his new organization is a means to a bigger end.

"That's a million years from now," he said of the next governor's election. "There's no grand slam idea that gets everything solved. It's a series of baby steps, and it will take time. But the fact of the matter



is, we cannot wait to start that.”



THOMAS P. COSTELLO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Rock star Jon Bon Jovi (center) is flanked by Philip Murphy, chairman and co-founder of New Start New Jersey (right) and Cornell William Brooks, president and CEO of the NAACP.