‘Columbus Way’ has benefited the city, but what about black community?

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The “Columbus Way” has been credited with helping to save the Columbus Crew, build the Scioto Mile and bring the new Veterans Memorial and Museum to fruition.

That formula includes public-private partnerships, cooperation and the polite, Midwestern way of doing things — often behind the scenes. As has been cited many times, the Harvard Business School studies and teaches the Columbus Way of pulling off projects that require heavy lifting, and often lots of money.

But as Black History Month continues, some wonder whether these projects trickle down to the grassroots level, particularly to those in the African-American community.

Many in that community are looking for bigger strides to benefit and strengthen their economic and social stability and political influence.

“People talk a good game. I want to see action,” said Nana Watson, who leads the NAACP’s Columbus chapter. “Nobody wants to have an in-depth conversation in this community. Everybody gets along.”

But not everything is good, she said. “People are in poverty. There’s inadequate housing. All of those things have to do with race relations.”

Franklin County’s African-American population is now 307,394, of which about 27.3 percent live in poverty, according to U.S. census estimates. About 10.8 percent of white Franklin County residents lived in poverty in 2017.
And African-American babies in Franklin County are three times more likely to die than white babies.

Watson said race relations are better here than they were decades ago, but not as good as they should be. She mentioned the Kerner Commission report from 1968, which concluded that the nation was fracturing into two societies: one black and one white, separate and unequal.

“I think that holds true today,” Watson said. “We still fight for jobs. We still fight for equal pay. Housing and education. The have-nots and the have-nots.”

Stephanie Hightower, who leads the Columbus Urban League, said she has talked with Kenny McDonald, president and CEO of Columbus 2020, about the region’s thriving economy and low unemployment rate.

Yet there still are too many in the African-American community who are unemployed or underemployed, she said.

“We’re not just talking about poverty. It’s really about economic mobility, measured by wealth and income,” Hightower said.

“If we really want to talk about the Columbus Way, place does matter,” she said. “The issue of income inequality is important. The middle class (is) becoming extinct.”

By definition, it’s not enough for the successes of an area to “trickle down,” said Ohio State University President Michael V. Drake.

“Trickling down is never going to be enough. Could you lift up by trickling down?” said Drake, the first African-American president of the state’s flagship university. “Part of the American condition is we always need to be as intentional as we can to make sure the improvements that we see affect all people.”

Many will point to strides made in the public arena. Voters elected Columbus’ first African-American mayor, Michael B. Coleman, in 1999. He went on to serve four terms. Four of Columbus City Council’s seven members are African-
American. So is one of the area’s congressional representatives, Joyce Beatty of Jefferson Township, and several area members of the Ohio General Assembly.

Kevin Boyce is Franklin County’s first African-American commissioner. He said it’s a fair question to ask about how much progress has been made.

“I thought a lot about that,” he said. “The broad answer to that question is we’ve made improvements. But when you begin to peel back the layers, it suggests we still have some work to do.”

In November 2017, the NAACP’s Legal Defense and Educational Fund wrote to the Columbus City Council, concerned that the city’s at-large council system doesn’t represent the interests of the African-American community. “That these and other critical decisions are made in a system where Columbus’ black community members may not have an equal opportunity to elect their representatives of choice to city council is alarming,” the letter said.

“We have always been clear that we think that this runs afoul of a fair democratic process,” said Leah Aden, senior counsel for the NAACP fund.

Most members were appointed to the council, she said, with the backing of people with influence and money, and with the backing of the Democratic Party.

“That’s different from the interest of the voters,” she said. “Democrats are using the power of party politics to maintain control there.”

Councilwoman Priscilla Tyson, who is African-American, said the black community is being represented by not only the four African-American council members, but by all seven members.

“We work for everybody,” Tyson said. “There are going to be specific issues that the African-American community has concerns about.” She pointed to the Commission on Black Girls she established to study the quality of life of girls and young women ages 11-22.

Coleman said the Columbus Way has been key in the redevelopment of the Near East Side near Ohio State University Hospital East.

Almost a decade ago, Ohio State announced plans for a 17-story tower that was part of a $1 billion expansion of the OSU Medical Center’s main campus.
Columbus gave OSU an incentive equal to 30 percent of city income taxes generated by new jobs, capped at $35 million over 15 years. In return, the university agreed to spend $10 million in the Near East Side, $9 million for housing and $1 million in health-care incentives.

That now includes a 104-unit senior apartment building, and other new apartments on the old Poindexter Village public-housing site.

“All came about through the concept of exercising the Columbus Way, and it works,” he said.

Drake said the university has always received support from city and private partners for its programs aimed at lifting minority populations in the community and at the university.

Still, the percentage of black students at Ohio State’s Columbus campus was 5.68 percent 2017, the most recent year for which federal data are available. That was the lowest percentage of black students among colleges in the city, and in the bottom three among public four-year universities in Ohio.

Drake said that Ohio State has grown its number of black students, but the percentage hasn’t changed much because the university is adding in other areas, such as international students. Still, he said, the school is “continually pushing” to increase its number of black students, pointing to the school’s expansion of its Young Scholars Program, which supports first-generation college students.

“We’re encouraged when we look over the long arc to see how incredibly different things are from how they were a generation or two or three or four ago,” Drake said. “But, I will say, as we do that, we find disappointing reminders of things that aren’t as different as we would wish that they were.”

Coleman noted that diversity needs to be reflected in every part of the community, “including those who report” the news, referring to The Dispatch staff.

Boyce said leaders still have an opportunity to address these issues in the long term, “really figuring out how the Columbus Way is not connecting the dots for every family. Small businesses, too.”
“We haven't mastered how to apply the Columbus Way at the grass-roots, so that everyone can flourish and thrive in central Ohio,” he said.

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