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Blacks getting shortchanged by 'inclusive' diversity programs in Columbus, Franklin County, NAACP says

By **Kimball Perry**

The Columbus Dispatch



Posted Jul 23, 2017 at 5:45 AM

Nana Watson approached the microphone last week to tell Franklin County commissioners that, although she is president of the NAACP's Columbus branch, she opposed the "inclusion and diversity plan" that the commissioners were ready to approve because her group had not been consulted.

"We were blindsided by them; we would not do that to them," Watson said of the commissioners' plan.

Watson and the local NAACP's other leaders have become more aggressive about seeking out officials to say they want to be included in planning and building the future. And they want to make sure the region's approximately 250,000 black residents have at least as much access to jobs and training as any other group does.

Despite pleas last week from County Administrator Kenneth Wilson to approve the inclusion plan, the three commissioners, all Democrats, agreed to table it for one week. It's expected to be adopted Tuesday after the NAACP studies it. The plan's goal is to provide more opportunity for minorities to bid on government work and have access to jobs and job training.

That's an example of how the NAACP executive board is flexing its muscles after a period when the group was more reactive. The NAACP under Watson's leadership is taking the initiative and making its collective voice heard.

Regarding the inclusion plan, Watson and the NAACP wanted to make sure that commissioners heard their message before the county spends \$200 million on the new jail and morgue.

“We’re here ... to carry the burdens of people who have no voice,” Watson said of the 500 to 600 people who pay a \$30 annual NAACP membership fee. “It’s not personal. Our style is much different. We want to be part of the solution and not the problem. That approach has worked.”

It worked with the commissioners.

“They’re doing their job. They’re fighting for access for more opportunities for minorities and other underrepresented groups,” said Kevin Boyce, Franklin County’s first and only black commissioner, elected last fall.

“Nana Watson is a much more active leader,” he said. “She’s aggressive.”

Watson, 70, is an Eastmoor High School graduate and resident of the Berwick neighborhood who was elected in November 2015 to lead the local NAACP branch, which had gone nearly dormant. It was barely a blip on the radar of the national organization, which was founded in 1909 in response to whites violently rioting against blacks in Springfield, Illinois.

Watson vowed that would change. “We’ve got an agenda,” she said after taking over.

Earlier this year, Watson quietly convened a meeting between Columbus school officials and black vendors upset about their lack of success in getting district contracts. The movement appeared to ultimately result in the school board replacing the district’s purchasing director, whom some black contractors accused of manipulating the system against them.

“Under her presidency, the organization has been engaged,” said Columbus Board of Education President Gary Baker. “I see that as a good thing, and I think the district views the NAACP as an important partner.”

Watson and the NAACP also have met with Mayor Andrew J. Ginther to make opinions known — whether they are appreciated or not — on hiring, jobs programs, police body cameras, a city disparity study of contracts, and police-community relations.

Dawn Tyler Lee, a deputy chief of staff in Ginther’s office, said of the meeting with the NAACP: “We shared issues of concern.”

Now, Watson said, the NAACP wants to be engaged with government and business. It wants to provide new ideas and assistance in helping all prosper.

“If we’re going to get out of poverty, we need jobs,” Watson said.

Lee praised the NAACP for co-hosting a community forum to explain how the body cameras to be worn by Columbus police will be used.

Watson is unapologetic that her NAACP chapter wants to place its members at the head of the line. "We're here to talk about blacks," Watson said.

She pointedly insisted that the local NAACP won't support the commissioners' agreement to require all workers on the jail-construction project to be union members or pay union dues and fees.

"Unions are not black-friendly," Watson said. "Until they intend to include us, it's about fairness."

It's that type of bluntness that has defined Watson and the local NAACP since she was elected.

"Nana Watson is a unique leader who's going to be very effective," Boyce said.

Even if she upsets some people — or many.

"Sometimes, their message is difficult to hear," Lee said.

For example, Watson insists that the commissioners' inclusion and diversity plan is *too* inclusive.

"Inclusion is a big tent now," Watson said. "When you include other groups, you dilute what the law was intended for, so, here we go, the blacks get less and less of the pie. We haven't had it in years and years."

Latinos, Asians and others have become competition for blacks in winning work on government contracts, Watson said. She noted that the **Franklin County inclusion plan** lists LGBTQ businesses as a qualifying minority group.

"There is no data to show that those groups have been discriminated against" for government hiring or contracts, Watson said.

Many federal programs and grants require studies to determine whether underrepresented groups have been discriminated against and how that can be remedied.

Watson says that mindset isn't discriminatory.

“I don’t think that’s exclusion because we want our fair share of the pie. We’ve never had our share,” she said.

“I’m not going to comment on that,” said Grant Stancliff of Equality Ohio, an LGBTQ organization.

Lee thinks the NAACP would like the city’s disparity study to look only at whether black-owned businesses have been hurt.

“A lot of times, organizations like the NAACP, whether locally or nationally, are seen as adversaries,” Lee said.

“Sometimes, we agree to disagree.”

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