

The Columbus Dispatch

As middle class shrinks, Columbus must find ways to share prosperity, urbanist warns

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Columbus remains a beacon in the Rust Belt, known nationally for its fast-growing population and robust economy. But a researcher who studies urban disparity says the city also stands at a dangerous crossroads, one that threatens to choke off the path to a middle-class livelihood.

“The time to think about this is now,” Richard Florida told an audience Wednesday at the Mershon Auditorium at Ohio State University.

Florida, a former OSU faculty member who is now director of the Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto, said growth and prosperity patterns in Columbus and other thriving cities are creating stark divides between affluent and struggling neighborhoods, and between highly paid and low-wage workers.

“The new urban crisis is about the annihilation of the middle class in America,” Florida said. “It’s no longer middle-class flight. It’s a gaping hole.”

His research has found Columbus to be among the nation’s most economically segregated cities, second only to Austin, Texas. The Dispatch documented the growing income disparity in Columbus and Franklin County last month in

About one in three Franklin County residents lives in a household with income at or below 200 percent of the poverty line, which is now \$49,200 a year for a family of four.

The question to confront, Florida said, is “How do we get to shared prosperity?”

Improved public transit, affordable housing and liberalized zoning rules are all important, he said. And better-paying jobs are key.

“I think we need to understand that we as a society are not going to function well if we don’t pay people a living wage,” Florida said. “It’s a hard conversation to stimulate, and there is a lot of resistance.”

The Dispatch series found that much of Columbus’ job growth in the past 15 years has been in relatively low-wage categories such as home health, food service and warehouse work. The city also has added high-paying jobs that have fueled the rise of upscale and trendy neighborhoods such as German Village and the Short North.

Meanwhile, the number of middle-income neighborhoods continues to dwindle.

Columbus Mayor Andrew J. Ginther was part of a panel discussion — along with Findlay Mayor Lydia Mihalik and former Youngstown Mayor Jay Williams — that Florida moderated after his presentation. All agreed that cities need to lead the push for changes that best suit their communities.

“We know Ohio cities are driving the economy of the state,” Ginther said.

“Unless all neighborhoods are successful, this isn’t sustainable.”

Developers and businesses, he said, need “to invest in the neighborhoods and families that have been left out of the Columbus success story.”

The ability of Ohio cities to enact local wage floors was stymied in December when state legislators took away their authority to increase the minimum wage higher than the state rate, now \$8.15 an hour.

“Maybe cities ought to lead that conversation,” Ginther said.

In 2002, Florida wrote “The Rise of the Creative Class,” a book that spelled out how people working in creative occupations were transforming urban centers, and that cities that want to grow and succeed must do whatever it takes to draw and keep them.

But in his new book, “The New Urban Crisis,” Florida examines the flip side of that success. The “superstar cities” — places such as New York, San Francisco, Toronto and London — now are marked by spectacular income divides. A typical, detached single-family home in Toronto now costs nearly \$1.7 million, Florida said.

Columbus doesn’t yet hew to that “winner-take-all urbanism” that is wracking the middle class, Florida said. But the direction is troubling.

“We have to focus on this inclusive and shared part,” he said. “Poverty is not the problem. Poverty simply means the absence of economic development.”

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