Is a new generation of movers, shakers on horizon? ‘Titans’ helped shape Columbus. Who will take up the mantle?

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When Columbus was in the running for the federal Smart Cities grants in 2016, a group of the city’s most powerful corporate and civic leaders came together and, in an afternoon, put up tens of millions of dollars that helped the city beat out some of the nation’s most sophisticated tech hubs to win the competition.

It was the kind of move that had come to be expected from the group, dubbed “the Titans,” who operated under the auspices of the Columbus Partnership, formed in 2002 by billionaire Les Wexner and longtime Columbus Dispatch Publisher John F. Wolfe to help shape the city’s future.

Today, it’s a different story. Wolfe died in 2016, and Wexner, at age 86, has largely stepped back from public life, along with other powerful leaders of their generation such as former Nationwide CEO Jerry Jurgensen and developer Ron Pizzi. The Partnership, which started with eight of the city’s most powerful CEOs, has evolved into a chamber-of-commerce-style group of more than 70 members.

“I don’t think there’s a power structure anymore,” said one of many corporate and civic executives interviewed by The Dispatch privately for this article. “The Partnership is a shadow of itself.”

For some, the demise of a close-knit, intense group of CEOs who had the resources and power to guide the community simply means the town has recovered from the pandemic. For others, the loss of a scrappy, local group is a failure of college education at a time when many fear the university’s historic roots and the value of a degree.

Columbus Dispatch publisher John F. Wolfe, left, and L Brands founder Les Wexner, right, led a small and powerful group of civic leaders known as “the Titans” before Wolfe’s death in 2016. (MICHAEL CLARKE/COLUMBUS DISPATCH, FILE)

The 10 names you need to know

The Dispatch picked its top 10 community leaders based on multiple conversations with business, civic and philanthropic leaders. While there’s no firm definition of what makes a community leader, The Dispatch looked for those who: wield economic power or power from a bully pulpit, are well-connected across the community, possess a track record of involvement and activism, have the respect of other leaders, and who are deeply engaged in shaping Columbus. The list, presented alphabetically:

Jane Grote Abell
Age: 57
Title: Chairwoman of the board, chief purpose officer and founding family member of Donatos Pizza and Jane’s Dough Premium Frozen Custard
Affiliations: Reeb Center, Donatos Family Foundation, Texas Roadhouse board, YWCA, Lakehouse School for Children, Goodwill Columbus, Ross Leadership Institute, Otterbein Women’s Leadership, Advisory Council, Columbus’ Young Presidents Organization

Abell grew up on the South Side (she refers to the area as the South End) behind the first Donatos store and began working at the family store when she was 11. She led the family’s repurchase of Donatos from McDonald’s, returning the company to its Columbus roots. Outside of work, Abell has remained heavily involved in South Side affairs, including raising $14.5 million to start the Reeb Center, which she co-founded, to help lift people out of poverty.

Ted Carter
Age: 54
Title: President, Ohio State University
Affiliations: Former president of the University of Nebraska, U.S. Navy officer, former head of the Naval Academy

Carter has been on the job for just a few months so has yet to make his mark in what is arguably the most powerful position in Columbus. He has hinted at his priorities in a recent column by noting that 75% of this year’s class will stay in the state, bolstering local communities and helping Ohio compete in a global economy. In his early days as president, Carter has also emphasized the university’s historic roots and the value of college education at a time when many question whether college is worth it.
Jeff Edwards

Age: 60
Title: President and CEO, The Edwards Cos.; chairman, CEO, president, Installed Building Products

Affiliations: The Columbus Museum of Art, the Columbus Partnership, Columbus Landmarks, The Columbus Foundation, Columbus Downtown Development Corp., Battelle

Through his family’s real-estate firm, The Edwards Cos., Edwards has gone all on Downtown. In addition to previous developments, Edwards in recent years has converted much of the PVC Tower into loft offices, tenant apartments, restaurants and retail, while adding two additional restaurants and a rooftop bar and park. He helped to revive the district in ways that can be measured, and Edwards has been a tireless advocate for reviving the Downtown core in other transformative ways, such as the Connect aerial sculpture he funded, the elevated landscaped walkway his firm is building, and the Capital Line pedestrian and bike path he is championing.

Alex Fischer

Age: 57
Title: Former president and CEO of the Columbus Partnership


Fischer holds no formal position of power as he did when he ran the Columbus Partnership. In its heyday, the Partnership was influential in the background, and Fischer was crucial in making advancements in Downtown. He has been a tireless advocate for the Partnership, working to revitalize the Downtown area, and his leadership has been instrumental in making Downtown a vibrant and prospering area.

Sandy Doyle-Ahern

Age: 54
Title: President, EMH&T

Affiliations: OhioHealth, Columbus Metropolitan Library, Columbus Downtown Development Corp., Columbus State Community College, the Columbus Partnership, Columbus Blue Jackets Foundation, Columbus Academy, LinkUS Columbus Mobility Initiative

Doyle-Ahern’s list of “volunteer experiences” on her LinkedIn profile stretches to two dozen, including these: neighborhood picnics, but instead of some of the most important rooms in town including the board of OhioHealth and Columbus State Community College, Doyle-Ahern’s efforts have focused on improving housing, education, workforce development and other challenges facing the underserved. She has served on the Affordable Housing Trust for Columbus and Franklin County and, more recently, has volunteered as part of the Executive Council for the LinkUS initiative designed to improve mass transit along key routes.

Tanny Thorton

Age: 67
Title: President and CEO, Crane Group, former Crane Plastics

Affiliations: Ohio State University Foundation, the Columbus Partnership, the Reeb Avenue Center, Future Ready Columbus, I Know I Can, the Ohio Business Roundtable, Ohio State University Fisher College of Business, Huntington Bank

Crane has been so deeply involved in Columbus affairs for so long that it’s easy to forget she’s busy as ever. From their headquarters on the bi-cycling coast to raise money to fight cancer. In addition to Downtown community activities, including her long involvement at Ohio State University, Crane sits on several corporate and business boards including Huntington Bank, and formerly chaired the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland board. But much of Crane’s activity has focused on corporate endeavors such as formerly chairing the United Way of Central Ohio, and currently chairing the Reeb Center and co-chairing Future Ready Columbus, to help prepare children for kindergarten.

Lewis ‘Lou’ Von Thaer

Age: 53
Title: President and CEO, Battelle Memorial Institute

Affiliations: American Electric Power, Ohio State University board, InnovativeOhio, American Council for Capital Formation, Columbus Partnership executive committee.

Battelle is a nonprofit research giant that has its strengths in science and technology to fund charitable causes. Von Thaer has turned an emphasis on tech training with Battelle setting a goal of training 1.4 million students with its STEM education outreach and philanthropy programs. During the pandemic, Battelle worked with Ohio State to create a rapid diagnostic test for COVID-19 and developed a system to deliver it to N95 masks when there was a national shortage.
Four names to watch as Columbus grows

In addition to The Dispatch's 10 civic leaders, four younger Columbus-area executives are playing increasingly large roles in shaping central Ohio. The list, presented alphabetically:

**Brent Crawford**

**Age:** 51  
**Title:** Founder and principal, Crawford Hoying  
**Affiliations:** The Dispatch Leadership Institute, Center for Real Estate at Ohio State University, Children's Hospital Foundation

Crawford's role in developing Bridge Park gives him a platform in development conver- 
sations interstate I-71 (and) has reinvented one community while dramat- 
ically reshaping the discussion of what is pos- 
sible in the suburbs. As Bridge Park approach- 

e completion (with a possible expansion to 
the south), many eyes will be watching where Crawford turns next. And as an active speaker and teacher at alma mater, Ohio State Univer- 
sity, Crawford has helped spread the ges-

**Mantle**

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The Dispatch spoke with: Jeff Edwards, the CEO of Building Products and The Edwards Com- 
panies, which has been instrumental in shaping Downtown and beyond.

"Jeff Edwards is one of the most powerful people. He comes from a wealthy family but he's so kind, so thoughtful and himself; he's very responsive and has a vision of what the town and Downtown could possibly be," one told The Dispatch.

In many ways, Edwards fits the pattern of what made Wolfe and Wexner unusually well suited as community power brokers. The command of signifi-

**Matt Scantland**

**Age:** 45  
**Title:** Founder and CEO of AndHealth, former co-founder and CEO of CoverMyMeds  
**Affiliations:** Twofold Ventures (dedicated to building technology, health care, and media businesses), the Columbus Partnership, the American Institute of Architects, the development firm that has turned New Albany into the economic engine of central Ohio's east side and was instrumental in bringing Intel to the region.

The final handful of leaders outside central Ohio hold enormous power: the governor, the future.

"It doesn't have to be in the system that we know," one former business leader says he's optimistic that a new generation of leaders will emerge though 

**Brad DeHays**

**Age:** 40  
**Title:** CEO, Moody Nolan  
**Affiliations:** Columbus Zoological and Aquarum, Upper Arlington Rotary Club, Columbus Apartment Association, Columbus Gateway, the Columbus State Community Foundation, Franklin Park Conservatory, the American Institute of Architects

Moody's firm, meanwhile, has left its stamp on countless buildings in Columbus and beyond. The inclusion of their local offices in the Power Plant in the Arena District and the His- 
toric National Bank building in Columbus' Franklin Park.

DeHays most recently converted a former Schottenstein's warehouse on Westerville Road into a factory to make modular housing units for Summit Partners, reflect- 
ing his interest in seeking solutions to the re-

Still influential

While they may not occupy the stage as they once did, several prominent central Ohioans continue to shape the community in many ways.

M/I Homes CEO Robert Schottenstein remains active in Ohio State University affairs, as board chair of Polaris and in philanthropic events. Robert Weller, with the Robert Weller Company, is likewise deeply involved in civic events, especially in afford-

In addition to the rich person in Ohio, with a net worth that Forbes estimates at $3 billion. Wexner holds a-

One of the most important institutions in central Ohio: Ohio State University. There, he chairs the 
Wexner Medical Center board, and as a co-foun-
der, with Jack Keough, of Wexner Development Company, the development firm that has turned New Albany into the economic engine of central Ohio's east side and was instrumental in bringing Intel to the region.

Finally, a handful of leaders outside central Ohio hold enormous power: the governor, the future.

Jamie Dimon, the CEO of JPMorgan Chase & Co., overseeing the only largest private employer with nearly 20,000 workers. Dee Haslam has become a familiar face in Columbus. Joe Wexner, CEO of Intel, widens considerable influence as head of the largest economic development project in Ohio histo-

One former business leader says he's optimistic that a new generation of leaders will emerge though it may look different from the Titans.

"It doesn't have to be in the system that we know," the leader said. "They have to find their voice. It takes a little time."