

Pothole racial disparity is a relevant topic

Posted: Sept. 3, 2008



Eugene Kane

A friend of mine used to drive a car so beat up that his favorite joke was, "If I hit a pothole, it might actually make my ride look better."

He meant that living in the 'hood, potholes were considered a fact of life for some folks. Just like with trash pickup, police protection, pizza delivery, etc., some central city residents always accepted the fact they didn't get the same quality of service as everybody else.

The Journal Sentinel published results of an investigation that found the city's Department of Public Works didn't fix potholes in some areas of the city as quickly as in others. According to a statistical analysis, the city took longer to repair potholes in certain U.S. census tracts where the population was predominantly minority than it did in other areas.

In other words, if you were black or brown, you didn't get your potholes fixed as fast as people who were white. Not surprising when it comes to this touchy subject, many readers didn't want to accept that.

"It's unfortunate to read a story like this in the

Journal Sentinel," wrote one of many readers who responded to a JSOnline.com forum on the pothole investigation. "There could be many reasons for why potholes receive more attention in one place than another."

Another reader who responded to the online forum complained the article made too much of the problems of black people: "The north side has more crime, the worst schools and students in the world, corrupt local politicians and their (sic) worrying about pothole racism? Brilliant."

Yet another reader simply didn't accept any connection between potholes and race. In fact, he refused to consider any other implications. "This is ridiculous," the reader said. "Seeing this as racism is, at best, a HUGE stretch, and anyone who thinks otherwise needs their head examined."

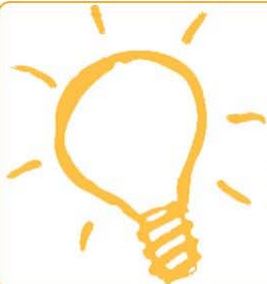
My sense is many of these readers are the same ones who automatically reject any suggestion that race plays a part in any aspect of everyday life. These are people who refuse to acknowledge the impact of race in anything, which I submit is just as troubling as those who see race in everything

There's got to be some middle ground.

Mayor Tom Barrett and some aldermen refrained from making definitive comments about the pothole racial disparity until after meeting with DPW officials. I spoke with Common Council President Willie Hines after the Journal Sentinel story ran, and he promised to look into the findings.

Hines - a black politician known for his thoughtfulness - seemed willing to accept evidence of a racial disparity without automatically chalking it up to inherent racism by DPW workers, some of whom might have been taking care of their own neighborhoods before they got around to someone else's.

Advertisement



A bright idea in online advertising.

PrinterStitial® ads by Format Dynamics.



FormatDynamics®

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™



That might be a bit selfish, but it's not necessarily racist.

Some Milwaukeeans are uncomfortable talking about race, but I think many are more than willing to talk about the subject as long as the conversation centers on failing black students, misbehaving black youth, black-on-black crime or former Ald. Michael McGee.

They don't like to discuss race when it involves the unequal treatment of some people by powerful institutions due to long-standing practices or traditions. I don't think there's anything wrong with putting that topic on the table for discussion.

Potholes can bust up your car, but ignoring these kinds of racial disparities can put a real dent on a city's image.

Contact Eugene Kane at (414)223-5521 or ekane@journalsentinel.com. Join him for a Web chat at noon Thursday at www.jsonline.com

© 2005-2007, Journal Sentinel Inc. All rights reserved. | Produced by [Journal Interactive](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

Archive

-  [Pothole racial disparity is a relevant topic](#) (9/4/2008)
-  [Dear Dad: Another barrier just crumbled](#) (8/31/2008)
-  [Families that steal together have skewed values](#) (8/28/2008)
-  [U.S. Olympic teams represent America's diversity, tolerance](#) (8/26/2008)
-  [Respect teachers, despite problems](#) (8/24/2008)
-  [More people should open up to the idea of light rail in Milwaukee](#) (8/21/2008)
-  [Fonz bronze reminds some of happier times](#) (8/19/2008)
-  [Another Olympic swimmer to admire](#) (8/17/2008)
-  [Textbooks are just part, not all, of a history curriculum](#) (8/14/2008)
-  [Let's not raise a glass to Milwaukee's second-drunkest 'honor'](#) (8/12/2008)
-  [Careers end early, and it's personal](#) (8/10/2008)
-  [Favre-Packers drama plays out like a failed marriage](#) (8/7/2008)
-  [You had ideas for improving city; philanthropist Zilber likes them](#) (8/5/2008)
-  [Crime statistics don't necessarily make people feel safe](#) (8/3/2008)
-  [Hubs of black culture are vital to city](#) (7/31/2008)
-  [Obama fever intrigues journalists of color](#) (7/29/2008)
-  [This journalism dinosaur has no regrets](#) (7/22/2008)
-  [African festival is too important to lose](#) (7/20/2008)
-  [Keep witnesses talking by not naming them](#) (7/17/2008)
-  [Let's embrace the change](#) (7/15/2008)

Advertisement



A bright idea in online advertising.

PrinterStitial® ads by Format Dynamics.



FormatDynamics®

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™