

ERIE COUNTY DIVERSE ERIE COMMISSION
Meeting Minutes

Thursday, January 12, 2023
Blasco Public Library- Hirt Auditorium
160 East Front Street
Erie, PA 16507 at 6:00 PM

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/85657710031?pwd=aFRkUXgzWWd2WndHWXE3K3dJSVMvUT09>

Meeting ID: 856 5771 0031
Passcode: 402873

Invitees: Tiffany LaVette; Sarah Carter, M.D.; Gwendolyn White; Brandy Cortes; Jonathan Atkinson; Mario Medina; Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo; Timothy Wachter; Gary Lee

1. Call to Order/Roll Call All present 6:05PM

2. Approval of the Agenda

Motion was made by Gwendolyn White and seconded by Dr. Sarah Carter, to approve the January 12, 2023, agenda as presented. All commissioners present voted in favor.

3. Introduction of New Commissioners

(a) **Ricardo “Rocky” Escajadillo:** Physical therapist by trade, originally from Memphis, TN, has lived in Erie County for seven plus years, working full time as a whole health program manager at the Veteran’s Administration. Helping to transform the culture around the way that healthcare is delivered. Dr. Escajadillo expressed his excitement to be on this commission board, and that he is really taking it all in with a beginners’ mindset.

(b) **Jonathan Atkinson:** An Erie native, Mr. Atkinson stated that he is a licensed professional therapist with the Veteran Medical Center. Currently, a manager of the homeless care supervisor as well as the minority veteran’s program coordinator and is looking forward to serving and getting to know all other commission board members.

(c) **Mario Medina:** Practicing attorney at law that expressed his enthusiasm to join the commission board as he gets to know all the boards members.

4. Executive Session-Closed to the public

Motion was made by Gwendolyn White and seconded by Mario Medina to recess the board meeting and to go into an Executive Session to obtain legal advice from the commission board’s solicitor. All commissioners present voted in favor.

5. Election of Officers

Motion was made by Gwendolyn White and seconded by Mario Medina and Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo, to rescind the nominations for commission board chairperson. Allowing Tiffany L. LaVette to remain as Chairwoman for the Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion Commission. All commissioners present voted in favor.

Motion was made by Gwendolyn White and seconded by Tiffany LaVette, to table the elections for commission officers until the next commission board meeting. All commissioners present voted in favor.

6. Hearing of the Public

Valerie Perkins:

Read a letter addressed to County Executive, Brenton Davis, that began "We, the BIPOC Black, Indigenous People of Color community of Erie County, respect, support the leadership roles of and desire the continued roles of Mrs. Tiffany LaVette, Ms. Gwendolyn White and Dr. Sarah Carter as commissioners of Diverse Erie." She further read that "We are very disappointed by the premature and illegal removal of Dr. Adrienne Dixon from the commission, and would appreciate, County Executive Brenton Davis, addressing those situations in an amiable manner." Ms. Perkins continued to read from the letter referencing Resolution 43, Ordinance 72, and the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) of 2020. Asking the County Executive and Erie County Council members to reverse the decision to allocate \$3.5M of ARPA funds to Diverse Erie, so that it may continue its mission to contribute to the recovery and growth of the most disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic to economically empower minority populations and businesses in Erie County. Additionally, Ms. Perkins asked the new commissioners to "uphold the law and release grant funds to the awardees of the Generational Impact Grant Initiatives." She thanked the commission board, and its audience members on behalf of the BIPOC community, Greater Calvary Baptist Church Social Justice Ministry, and the African American Concern Clergy.

Art Leopold: Thanked and welcomed the new commissioners and thanked them for their decision to join. Mr. Leopold stated that he does appreciate and support the work that the commission does and that it is vitally important for Erie's BIPOC communities. He said that we have segments of this community that have been in generational hurt because they've been left behind and this commission was formed for an opportunity to begin to see those communities and to lift those folks up. Mr. Leopold has shown the commission 100% of his support. He mentioned, the greater goal is the goal of lifting up those neighborhoods in the BIPOC communities. Mr. Leopold announced that Erie County has now gotten in more ARP funds that could be devoted to DEI Commission. Mr. Leopold added that originally, the DEI commission had \$10M purposed, then it was \$7M, currently \$3.5M. He said, "God bless that \$3.5M." He asked if the county council could see their way to reconsider funding these organizations because they sorely need to fund and the communities that they serve.

Attorney William Kelly: Bill Kelly, Erie County resident, joined the meeting on behalf of two of my clients, Mr. Gerald L. Blanks, CEO of the Greater Area Economic Development Corporation (GEEDC) and Mr. Matt Harris, Co-Founder of the East Side Renaissance (ESR). With a very narrow scope, while speaking to this body, Mr. Kelly attempted to summarize the reason for his involvement with this organization. He then stated that the last thing he'd want to do is sue the DEI Commission. He also declared to a new reconstituted commission board, "Please

authorize Mr. Lee to write my clients the checks.” Referring to the Generational Impact Grant (GIG) awards and added that “the County Executive is not king, he's not president, and he doesn't dictate your actions. Any attempt by the County Executive to try to involve himself in your business. It's none of my business, but you have contracts with my clients.”

Freda Topfer: Mrs. Topfer, lives in the city of Erie, spoke about reading constantly about the incidents of violence in our city, the incidents of intergenerational poverty, the history of redlining. And that there are poor people all over the county, not just in Erie. And with real optimism and admiration, she said she looked at the unanimously constructed, carefully constructed plan for the utilization of the ARPA funds that the prior county council had that constituted this commission. Mrs. Topfer added, how sad it is now to stand here and watch. Accounts to take that money and not use it to address systemic poverty. Not used to right the wrongs of redlining. Not used to help address the true causes of violence. She said that she hopes that this commission has the guts and the integrity to use this process to benefit the citizens of our county, the ones that are entitled to this money.

Former County Councilman Carl Anderson: Carl Anderson, a city of Erie resident, and a former chairman of Erie County Council. Mr. Anderson stated that he had the honor of serving county council and serving the Erie community while putting the funding programs together for the ARPA funding. He said that he had the opportunity to lead county council during that time and worked unanimously with his colleagues to put together a fair and impartial program that was meant to give seed money across the board to ensure that everybody got something, and nobody got everything. To right the wrongs, mentioned by the disenfranchised citizens across the county. Mr. Anderson said that many of the programs that we funded have a mandated component of Human Services that Erie County must provide, in fact has a responsibility to provide. And that is community development for all of us to live together, to work, to participate in these funding opportunities with universal unity, with collaboration and cooperation. In understanding the potential issues, that the DEI Commission have and the unfortunate defunding of \$3.5M was put in place to match the population percentage that persons of color represent an Erie County 15%. In Erie County, the \$3.5M represented 15% of each of two \$26M awards from the federal government. Under the regulations of the federal government, we followed those stipulations creating this board and it's unfortunate that the funding has been cut. Mr. Anderson also stated that he hopes that this board will fight to ensure that that funding is reinstated.

Marcella Janick: stood as part of the black indigenous people of color in Erie County and just wanted to repeat what was already said by the representative, Mr. Carl Anderson. Only, Mrs. Janick added that she strongly stands behind Ms. Tiffany LaVette, Ms. Gwendolyn White and Dr. Sarah Carter to remain as part of the Diverse Erie Commission, as the commission board members and She asked commissioners to vote to release the grants funds and let the work continue.

County Councilwoman Mary Rennie: Councilwoman Rennie expressed her support for Diverse Erie as she repeated the importance of the mission of Diverse Erie, which cannot be understated and nor should it be diluted by redefinition or reworking of the original intent of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Commission. Ms. Rennie then stated that she is supporting, not only the new commission board, but also her own appointee Ms. Gwendolyn White. She concluded by thanking Ms. White and all the commissioners for their service to the commission.

7. Approval of the Minutes of Previous Meetings

A motion was made by Dr. Sarah Carter and seconded by Brandy Cortes to approve the October 17, 2022, to the agenda as presented. All commissioners present voted in favor.

8. Approval of the November 14, 2022, Meeting Minutes

Motion was made by Gwendolyn White and seconded by Mario Medina to approve the December 14, 2022, Meeting Minutes as presented. All commissioners present voted in favor.

9. Presentations None

10. Report of Chief Administrative Officer – Gary Lee

Operational Matters:

(I) Personnel

- i. Nothing to Report

(II) Budget

- i. The commission has reached the settlement agreement with Doherty and Associates, the previous payroll accounting firm. The new accounting firm is Buseck, Barger, Bleil & Co., Inc., a local firm with an outstanding reputation.
- ii. The commission is using ECCA Payroll another local firm for payroll services.
- iii. The commission is obtaining proposals for auditing services for review of financial statements for the calendar year 2022.
- iv. The Chief Administrative Officer is recommending purchase authority be granted to the officer for all purchases under \$10K and all purchases over \$10K be presented to the commission board for approval.
 - a. A written policy will be submitted to the Finance Committee for consideration.
- v. The overall projected budget is in good financial shape, and we are operating within the financial parameters established by the commission.

(III) Media and Presentation.

- i. Nothing to Report

(IV) Grants Development

- i. The grant review team has completed the details on the small grant initiatives (\$5000 to \$25,000) for small business. Detailed guidelines on this program have been developed by Attorney Wachter and reviewed by the grants team. A waiting direction and next steps from the by board
- ii. The 3i Networking team has the Generational Impact Grant Guidelines, policies, and procedures for distribution of funds for the five contracts have been signed by the contract awardees and are ready for execution by the commission. Awaiting directions and next by board.

- iii. The Small Business Diverse Fund has issued two loans.
 - 1. \$25,000 to Lake Erie Woodworks owner Armando Reyes
 - 2. \$177,750 to Pineapple Eddie's owner Karen Thomas
- iv. Mr. Lee and team continues to explore the homeownership and educational programs with key stakeholders in the county for Phase II of our major initiatives.
- v. The 3i Networking has developed a list of potential grant opportunities for the commission to apply for and leverage investments by the commission. The goal is for the commission is to apply for to six grant opportunities during the first quarter of 2023.

(V) Website Development and Branding

- i. Meeting weekly with Parker-Philips team regarding the strategic plan and branding process, such as website and social media development. Preparing op-ed articles to support DEI initiative in Erie County.
- ii. The team Parker-Philips is developing an annual report, which will highlight all the key initiatives and projects by the commission in 2022.
- iii. Please encourage associates, family, and friends to visit our website and social media platforms for current information.

(VI) Other Key items

- i. The commission has prepared a binder for each commissioner that details and highlights the history of the commission. Included in the binder left pocket is the Statement of Financial Interests, which should be completed by you and submitted to Mr. Lee before February 10, 2023.
- ii. Erie's Inclusive Growth: A Framework for Action aka Infinite Erie. The Action Team remains fully committed to the goals and objectives of the commission.
- iii. Mr. Lee encouraged commissioners to continue to share commission updates with their council person and circle of influences. Stating that this is an excellent opportunity to bring people along on our journey by creating a new mindset.

A motion was made by Mario Medina and seconded by Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo to approve the Report of the Chief Administrative Officer as presented. All commissioners present voted in favor.

11. Reports of Commission Officers

- (a) Tiffany LaVette – Vice Chair
 - i No Report
- (b) Sarah Carter, M.D. – Treasurer
 - i No Report

12. Reports of Committee Chairpersons

- (a) Finance Committee – Sarah Carter, M.D.
- (b) Grants Committee – Tiffany LaVette

13. Unfinished Business

- (a) No Unfinished Business

14. New Business

2023 Meeting Schedule and a doodle poll next week

15. Adjournment

Motion was made by Gwendolyn White and seconded by Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo to adjourn the January 12, 2023, meeting at 7:58PM. All commissioners present voted in favor.

