

ERIE COUNTY DIVERSE ERIE COMMISSION

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, March 30, 2023

Diverse Erie Headquarters

1128 State Street, Suite 300, Erie, PA 16501 at 6:00 P.M.

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89414112230?pwd=N05PNncxWmtxSDhUcms0YWZocUZjdz09>

Meeting ID: 894 1411 2230

Passcode: 791883

Invitees: Tiffany LaVette; Dr. Sarah Carter; Gwendolyn White; Brandy Cortes; Jonathan Atkinson; Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo; Marie “Mia” Wells; Saeedullah Taraky; Paul Kokhanevich; Timothy Wachter; Gary N. Lee

1. Call to Order/Roll Call 6:00PM

- (a) Gwendolyn White-not present
- (b) Marie A. Wells (Mia)-not present

Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo initiated a breathing technique to help bring us all into the present mentally. He read a Unity Statement to the board and the audience, that declared “Erie County Diverse Erie Commission will continue to work to create an environment where all people of color are welcomed and included and we are just getting started together with his fellow Commissioners, saying that we are proud to continue to lead the necessary conversations that will bring our community along, embracing the philosophy that people of color can be there authentic selves and still be included.” (See attachment for complete Unity Statement)

2. Approval of the Agenda

A Motion was made by Tiffany L. LaVette, and seconded by Jonathan Atkinson, to approve the March 1, 2023, agenda as presented. All commissioners present voted in favor.

3. Hearing of the Public

Art Leopold:

Mr. Leopold thanked the commissioners and staff members, and announced that he has provided commissioners, reports from the Federal Reserve Banks of San Francisco, St. Louis, also the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland as well to Erie County Council. The reports provide information to support ideas, that there can be good investments made in Erie County’s BIPOC communities with funds from the American Rescue Plan Act. He said that he’d rather that county council consider increasing the funds, now having other investment ideas, before they vote to pull back the investment that should have been allocated to the DEI Commission here in Erie County. Mr. Leopold said that he’d heard that the money has been duly approved and is in a bank. Mr. Leopold suggested that the new full commission board resolve whatever issues necessary to get the first tranche of money out to the groups and organizations that have been waiting to be

awarded grant funds from the Generational Impact Grant Initiative. He thanked the commission board members for their devotion to time and energy.

Andre Horton:

Mr. Horton again congratulated the new commission board and the new Chairman Dr. Ricardo “Rocky” Escajadillo and said that he came to the meeting to say that he is now encouraged by the composition of the new commission board. Mr. Horton said that he did as he said he would do. He said that he went to his colleagues at Erie County Council to purpose that the \$3.5M approved for allocation by the previous administration be put back in the budget or released to help fund the operations and initiatives of the DEI Commission. Mr. Horton explained that he was not able to accomplish that goal, but he was able to convince them to agree to have the funds set aside in a restricted account.

Larry Brown, Sr.:

Is a born Erie-ite, who met with Councilmen Jim Winarski and Terry Scutella, at Greater Calvary’s Social Justice group meeting. He said that the two men vowed to do some things to help the BIPOC community of the city of Erie and to help Erie County residents. He did not elaborate on the things that were discussed in their meeting. Mr. Brown said that he’d take them at their word. However, the group at Greater Calvary let the councilmen know that what the newly elected County Executive Brenton Davis is appearing to do is politics, that borderlines systemic racism by attempting to discredit the previous board members and hurt their professional reputations with slander. Mr. Brown said that Brenton Davis is upset because Reverend Dwayne Brock of Eastside Renaissance called him a “white devil” at a press conference. And that now he's (Davis) taken aback by what one person says and takes it out on the total populist. Black, Brown, Asian, Native, and poor whites. Mr. Brown, quoted Erie County Council’s Chairman Brian Shank, as saying “I think they're just struggling to get started and they kind of step on the wrong foot, and maybe tripped a little bit at the beginning and that’s why we put a pause on it. We’re going to put some new people in there, get the Commission up and running, set them free. And let them go.” Mr. Brown discerned that the statement had connotations of a racial slur. He proclaimed that that’s an issue, since America has a history of systematic racism, “It is time now to stand up. And not shut up.”

Valeria Perkins:

Referred to a timeline of Diverse Erie activities, and wanted to highlight what was on County Executive Davis’s platform at the beginning of his term. Ms. Perkins repeated that the first thing he (Davis) wanted to do was to disrupt and dismantle the DEI Commission. Ms. Perkins said that she thinks he is actively trying to do that, to a much-needed commission that was formed to help BIPOC communities. She said that because Mr. Horton mentioned that County Council meeting on Tuesday, she would like to remind him that every other commission and board in the County of Erie has been funded except the DEI. Ms. Perkins said that she did not understand why Mr. Lee was asking for a raise. She asked that he not do that until this “thing” is settled, until the monies have been funded to the DEI Commission from county council.

4. Approval of the March 1, 2023, Meeting Minutes

Amendment to the March 1, 2023, Meeting Minutes:

Commission Gwendolyn White requested that a performance evaluation be conducted for Diverse Erie office staff before there can be a motion to approve the annual costs of living increase for both Mr. Gary N. Lee as the Chief Administrative Officer and Devan D. Mitchell as the Assistant Office Administrator.

Motion to approve March 1, 2023, meeting minutes, with corrections, was made by Tiffany L. LaVette and seconded by Jonathan Atkinson. All commissioners present voted in favor.

5. Presentations:

Marissa Thomas-President of 3i Networking gave a brief explanation for each project that will receive the Generational Impact Grant award. Noting that each project has a generational impact in the BIPOC community by creating jobs, restoring/renovating homes that will provide safe, affordable, and clean environment for historically disadvantaged families. She said that other organizations that applied for the grant opportunity may not have had impactful projects or that they simply did not meet the grant's guidelines/criteria. Marissa said that when 3i had completed its processes in relation to the grant initiative, the commission's grant review committee then reviewed the process, guidelines, its criteria and made recommendations to select the grant award recipients.

Tyrone L. Clark elaborated on Marissa's presentation by further explaining how some of the projects will make a tremendous economic impact on the communities they serve. He continued by adding that the commission board had the final say to what projects got funded through the grant processes.

Councilman Andre Horton added that the MCIC project will engage in an even more impactful project by adding land, solar power sources, and building partnerships with local vendors helping to create more employment opportunities for the BIPOC community.

Commissioner Paul Kokhanevich wanted to know what happens to the funds if the organizations find that they have funds left that could not be applied to another project or effort.

Mr. Tyrone Clark of 3i responded by saying that one of the critical elements of 3i Networking's evaluation process was to include a review of the feasibility of the capital projects, if awarded the funds are likely to be used entirely with no excess to afford any other projects or programs not listed in the Generational Impact Grant guidelines.

6. Report on Chief Administrative Officer: Gary Lee

Operational Matters:

1. Personnel:

- a. Mr. Lee stated that, the annual cost of living increase is overdue. The annual increase will stay in line with the county of Erie benefit increase each year in January. This year it is to be up to 4% more cost of living increase. The consideration was presented to the Executive Committee. He added that Dr. Escajadillo would provide additional feedback and information on the increase during the report from the Chairman.

2. Budget:

- a. Mr. Gary Lee said that the Finance Committee, is going to be led by Chairman Maria Wells and is being created and will meet monthly.
- b. A review of the February 2023 financial reports, the budget versus actual banking statements, expense reports and supporting documentation with a list in detail with the Executive Committee. He noted that the other committee members on the board will receive a copy of that information as well.
- c. Mr. Lee added that the overall budget projected budget is in good shape, and that we are operating within the financial parameter of the commission.

3. Media and Presentations:

- a. None currently.

4. Grants Development:

- a. Mr. Lee explained that the new elected Vice-Chairman Jonathan Atkinson, will be reaching out to board members for volunteers to sit on the grant review committee. There will potentially be an announcement of the full committee at the next commission board meeting, on April 20th.
- b. Mr. Lee said that the small business grant initiative of \$5,000-\$25,000 for small businesses is the next major project for the commission to initiate. The guidelines and applications for the initiative are ready and have been shared with the Vice-Chairman Jonathan Atkinson to share with the newly formed grant review committee. Mr. Lee reminded the commission that it is just a matter of the new grant review committee sitting down, reviewing it, and giving us the go. The goal for that initiative is to roll it out as soon as possible.
- c. Mr. Gary Lee stated, Vice-Chairman, Mr. Jonathan Atkinson is in the process of forming the committee and plans will be to monthly or more frequently if determined by the chairperson.
- d. On March 13, 2023, 3i Networking held a review session concerning the generational impact grant reimbursement policy. All five of the round one grant awardees were invited to attend. The purpose of the review session was to outline the policy and procedures necessary for reimbursement. Mr. Lee said that the reimbursement process was conveyed to the awardees that signed the agreement on November

11th, 2022. Mr. Lee added that there was a delay in the process that caused some concern for the awardees, and that since the delay was not the fault of the awardees, the commission will be considering the suggestions provided by the awarding organizations. The main concern that they had was the drawdown of the reimbursement process. Mr. Lee explained that it was shared with the awardees that the reason why the commission has that policy in place is to ensure full compliance with the US Department of Treasury. He reported that when ready the Grant Review committee will explore if there is an opportunity that we could put in place that will allow us to break down some of the reporting barriers required from the US department of Treasury. Noting that the commission has already started thinking up some creative ways that satisfy both the awardees and the Department of Treasury.

5. Website Development and Branding:

- a. Mr. Lee and the team at Parker/Philips continue to work on the best strategy to get the information out to the community.
- b. As always, Mr. Lee encourages the commissioners and the audience to invite their family, friends, council person and anyone that can benefit from our information to our website and join our social media platforms. Mr. Lee thanked Andre Horton for attending the last two meetings and said to him that we all appreciate his influence and his commitment.
- c. Mr. Lee asked commissioners to please submit the statement of financial interest from the Ethics Commission as soon as possible.
- d. Mr. Gary Lee announced that in the first week of May 2023, there will be a very important board retreat/training session coming up. Some of the training will be dealing with the commission missions and goals, board governing through Robert Rules of Order and ethics commission policies and procedures.

Mr. Lee shared with the group a great book that he is currently reading, called *The Mountain is You*. The book relates to the transforming the mindset of any human being from self-sabotage into self-mastery. It was written by Brianna Wiest, Mr. Lee thinks it is so important that we as humans can all recognize that we have the ability to let the past go, and to envision the future that one would like to see and be a part of. Mr. Lee declared that he loved that the commission doesn't make excuses, we make adjustments, we don't get bitter, we get better. Mr. Lee added that is so important because as we go through this journey and talk about generational impact and the generational impact on Black businesses. This is one of the reasons he said that he believes it's so hard getting started because we are talking about legacy work. Mr. Lee closed his report by quoting the words of the late Rodney King, "can't we all just get along."

Motion to approve Report from the Chief Administrative Officer made by Tiffany L. LaVette and seconded by Brandy Cortes. All commissioners present voted in favor.

7. Reports of Commission Officers

- (a) Chairperson
 - (i) Appointment of Committee Chairpersons
- (b) Vice-Chairperson-No Report
- (c) Secretary-No Report
- (d) Treasurer-Not Present-No Report

8. Reports of Committee Chairpersons

- (a) Finance Committee
- (b) Executive Committee
- (c) Grants Committee

9. Unfinished Business

A motion was made by Tiffany LaVette and seconded by Brandy Cortes to approve the cost-of-living increase at a minimum 3% annually for Gary N. Lee, the increase will be retroactive as of January 1, 2023. In addition, the board recommended a level 10 pay grade for Devan Mitchell, increasing her hourly pay rate to \$18.17, and is also retroactive as of January 1, 2023.

Attorney Tim Wachter announced that the discussion of the status of the removal dispute was covered by the Unity statement.

10. New Business-No new business

Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo, the Unity Statement was read once again for supporters that came in after the first reading.

11. Adjournment

A motion was made by Tiffany L. LaVette and seconded by Paul Kokhanevich to adjourn the meeting at 7:30PM. All commissioners present voted in favor.

Attendees: Art Leopold, May Wassel, Valeria Perkins, County Council-Woman Mary Rennie, County Council-Man Andre Horton, Larry Brown, Dalen Hooks, Lisa Sayers-Thompson, and AJ Rao