

ERIE COUNTY DIVERSE ERIE COMMISSION

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, June 15, 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/85845458689?pwd=akZrMHE4QVpiWGH4QWx3MXJnVEtBUT09>

Meeting ID: 858 4545 8689

Passcode: 819381

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 6:01PM

- (a) Marie "Mia" Wells-Not Present
- (b) Gwendolyn White-Not Present
- (c) Jonathan Atkinson-Not Present
- (d) Dr. Sarah E. Carter-Not Present

2. Approval of the Agenda

A Motion was made by Paul Kokhanevich, and seconded by Tiffany L. LaVette, to approve the May 18, 2023, agenda as presented. All commissioners present voted in favor.

3. Hearing of the Public

(a) Art Leopold stated that as a member of the Erie Racial Justice Policy Initiative, he is very enthusiastic to hear that on Wednesday, June 21st, 9:00AM, Kerry L. Kirkland, Deputy Secretary for Diversity, Inclusion & Small Business Opportunities, will be in Erie to conduct a training overview on "Certification and How to do Business with the Commonwealth." he will be engaging with the Erie community to discuss among other things the DBE (Disadvantaged Business Enterprise) certifications, which are scarce in our area and pose challenges for those seeking state contracts. Mr. Leopold was glad to know that ERCGP (Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership) had received support from Diverse Erie to gather individuals from the minority BIPOC community who are interested in addressing certification issues. He said that our aim is to advocate for and assist business owners in obtaining certifications, which are essential for winning certain contracts. Mr. Leopold expressed that he thinks that it may be worth considering whether our group can help alleviate the financial burden of certification fees, which typically range from \$600 to \$1000. By setting aside funds or incorporating this support into our existing efforts, we can facilitate the involvement of minority and women-owned businesses in the certification process. This consideration would benefit those who find the expenses prohibitive. Mr. Leopold thanked the commissioners and said that he eagerly awaits updates on the next Diverse Erie endeavors.

4. Approval of the April 20, 2023, Meeting Minutes

Motion to approve April 20, 2023, meeting minutes, was made by Paul Kokhanevich and seconded by Brandy Cortes. All commissioners present voted in favor.

5. **Presentations:** None

6. **Report on Chief Administrative Officer:**

Operational Matters:

Personnel:

- a. No issue for discussion

Budget:

- (a) The Finance Committee reviewed the financial reports for May 2023, which included a comparison of the budget and actual expenses, an updated overview of the budget, banking statements, expense files, and relevant supporting documents. Of particular concern was the budget versus actual analysis, which revealed that most expenses were within expectations, except for the legal services. In May alone, our expenses related to solicitors, bills, and special counsel for ongoing litigation with ESR and GEEDC amounted to \$9,473. Year to date, our expenses reached \$51,127, exceeding the budgeted amount of \$40,000 by \$11,127. The Finance Committee intends to discuss strategies to address this overage moving forward. Mr. Lee mentioned that our expenses for May stood at \$37,590, aligning closely with our projections, excluding the additional expenses incurred due to ongoing litigation. Our total year-to-date expenses amount to \$185,966, while the annual budget is set at \$462,300, leaving a balance of \$276,334. Overall, we remain in a favorable financial position, but it is important to monitor the legal matters closely.
- (b) Mr. Lee informed us that he has reached out to Mr. Rick L. Clayton, a partner at the law firm Maloney, Reed, Scarpitti & Company, LLP, to discuss conducting an audit for the period ending on December 31, 2023. While we have already fulfilled the necessary financial requirements for 2022, it is essential to have an audit specifically for the year 2023. In March, Mr. Lee had a meeting with Mr. Clayton and requested ongoing communication with him. As we continued to work on our financial matters, including the transition to a new accountant, Mr. Lee added that he will follow up with Mr. Clayton as requested, around the beginning of October. Mr. Lee emphasized that our efforts in this regard are ongoing, as he shared key aspects of the audit during our March meeting, which Mr. Clayton asked Mr. Lee to begin addressing. Hence, Mr. Lee will continue making progress in those areas, with the ultimate goal of completing the audit for the fiscal year ending in December 2023.

Media and Presentations: None

Grants Development:

- (a) According to Mr. Lee, the reimbursement process for Generational Impact Grant Round-1 is progressing smoothly. He happily reported that the Mercy Center for Women has received the full investment amount of \$100,000. Mr. Lee mentioned attending an open house event at the Mercy Center for Women on June 7th, Secretary Cortes attended as well. Mr. Lee expressed his belief in the project's worthiness, describing it as a robust initiative that will greatly benefit the community. The presence of numerous community leaders, civic figures, and business representatives at the event was seen as highly encouraging. Furthermore, Mr. Lee

- extended his congratulations to our team for their achievement. However, he was made aware that Diverse Erie did not receive recognition on the Funder's Wall, which acknowledges the project's investors, specifically for the transitional housing project at the Mercy Center. In response, Mr. Lee took the initiative to discuss this matter with Ms. Jennie Hagerty, the Executive Director, who then rectified the situation immediately.
- (b) On June 8th, an on-site visit to the East Side Renaissance (ESR) project was conducted by 3i Networking and Mr. Lee, and they unanimously agreed that the project is advancing satisfactorily. ESR has duly submitted the necessary documentation for the second investment check, which was issued today, June 15th, 2023. Consequently, this organization has received the full investment amount of \$250,000 and expressed their gratitude for the support. Additionally, ESR has expressed eagerness to collaborate with the Commission to promote transparency and inform the community about the allocation of our funds.
 - (c) The Greater Erie Economic Development Corporation (GEEDC) is currently facing unresolved issues regarding the requested additional information pertaining to the scope of work. There are various aspects that require clarification, such as the project schedule, marketing strategy, and strategies for attracting BIPOC businesses to the facility, among others. Additionally, the organization needs to address certain financial matters. To address these concerns, we decided to send a letter to the CEO and their executive committee. Although they responded, the content of their letter failed to meet the criteria set by the Diverse Erie Commission, which is the specific information we were seeking. As a result, we took the necessary step of consulting our attorney. Our attorney has now submitted a letter to address the concerns raised by the Commission. Our executive committee remains fully informed about the progress and details of this matter.
 - (d) During the evaluation of the Generational Impact Grant Round 2, the Grants Review Committee carefully examined a total of nineteen applications, which collectively requested funding exceeding \$4.6 million. As a highly competitive grant process, eight of these applications successfully met the fundamental requirements. For the remaining eleven applications, the committee conducted in-depth interviews for six of them as part of the comprehensive assessment.
 - (e) Mr. Lee informed the attendees that during tonight's meeting, under the new business section of the agenda, the Grants Review Committee will be proposing the selection of three organizations for potential awards of \$100,000 each. The committee's recommendation will be presented by our Chairperson Escajadillo, as Commissioner Atkinson, who is currently traveling, could not be present at the meeting.
 - (f) The Small Business Mini Grant Initiative is experiencing great success. The period for accepting applications was from May 15th to June 2nd. A total of forty-three applications have been received by the Commission for careful consideration. The grant review team is currently in the process of thoroughly reviewing all the applications and will present their recommendations to the board during the upcoming board meeting scheduled for July 20th.
 - (g) Mr. Lee shared that the commissioners should have received a grant search report from 3i Networking. The report aims to identify grant opportunities nationwide. The report, which examined thirty-five grant-offering entities, revealed that 95% of them

require organizations to have their own operational programs. Currently, our organization does not run programs, but the possibility of engaging in such activities in the future is not ruled out. The report recommends exploring collaborations with other entities involved in business development and home ownership to submit joint applications that promote diversity. While some partnership opportunities were explored, the timing was not suitable due to closed application periods. However, discussions with Erie County Council regarding their investment commitment will continue, as they remain a significant investor. Evaluating their continued interest in investing with us is a crucial aspect of our ongoing deliberations.

- (h) The grant review committee will be exploring additional steps in the realms of educational and training initiatives.

Website Development and Branding:

- (a) Mr. Lee urged commissioners to actively promote and encourage their family, friends, and associates to visit our website for the latest information. He emphasized the importance of actively encouraging them to do so. He emphasized the utmost importance of accessing our website and social media platforms, expressing the need to engage by liking and joining them. Furthermore, he stressed the significance of reaching out to council representatives and influential connections. Directing them towards our website and social media platforms was emphasized as a crucial step to ensure the widespread distribution of the latest information.

Mr. Lee was present at the Pennsylvania Black Legislative Black Caucus 50th Anniversary event held in Harrisburg on May 22nd. During this event, he actively participated in a press conference and engaged in panel discussions covering various topics. The discussions encompassed matters concerning black teachers, workplace inclusivity and belonging, black equity, health equity, incarcerated voter disenfranchisement, and lessons learned from border states in establishing an inclusive cannabis industry. It is of utmost importance for Mr. Lee to uphold and foster these relationships going forward. I had the opportunity to personally meet and converse with Speaker of the House Joanna McClinton, which was a pleasant experience.

On June 3rd, Mr. Lee attended the first graduation ceremony of Erie County Community College, which was a spectacular event. Governor Josh Shapiro served as the keynote speaker, and the ceremony was a great success. As the Director of Administration for the Dahlkemper administration, Mr. Lee expressed his pride in playing a significant role in the project's execution, as the Community College was not initially part of their agenda. He had the opportunity to lead the project's growth, and it was gratifying to see it come to fruition. Mr. Lee felt honored when the governor shook his hand during the procession at the event, and he looks forward to building a relationship with the governor's office in the future.

On June 3rd, Mr. Lee was presented with a Community Leadership Recognition Award by Mount Zion Seven Day Adventist Church for his contributions to the community. It was a great honor for him to receive this recognition. A luncheon was organized to celebrate the occasion, providing an opportunity for Mr. Lee to connect with the community. He found it to be a pleasant experience, as he was able to have meaningful conversations and be acknowledged for his work in the community.

A Motion to approve the report of the Chief Administrative Officer was made by Brandy Cortes and seconded by Paul Kokhanevich. All commissioners present voted in favor.

Reports of Commission Officers

- (a) Chairperson-No Report
- (b) Vice-Chairperson-No Report
- (c) Secretary-

1 Ms. Cortes reported that she did have an opportunity to visit the ribbon cutting ceremony for the Mercy Center for Women's Transitional Housing project. She said that she hopes that other organizations they have been awarded grant funds from the Diverse Erie grants initiatives will extend invitations to their events as well. She would love to visit all of them and offer my support. She described the event at the Mercy Center as a truly remarkable experience, and that the work they are doing is phenomenal, especially in renovating the school into two-bedroom apartments. These apartments cater to women facing challenges such as substance use disorders and other obstacles, representing a diverse population seeking a second chance. Notably, their children reside with them in the city. The apartments were furnished anew, providing everything the women needed. They also had access to a computer lab, a food pantry, and a workout area. The Dress for Success program assisted them in preparing for employment by offering a range of items, including handbags, jewelry, clothing, and shoes. Commissioner Cortes mentioned that the dedication of the staff and volunteers was exceptional, and the community support was truly impressive.

2 Secretary Cortes added that Mr. Antonio Howard, a former juvenile lifer now a reformed local artist and author, was present, displayed impressive artwork and even invited her to try painting. Brandy said that it would be wonderful to collaborate with him on future projects. She said that she is incredibly proud and grateful for the opportunity that she and Mr. Lee had, and I hope our colleagues will have similar experiences. Witnessing the tangible benefits of these programs for the people in attendance was inspiring. It is worth noting that there are openings available at the Mercy Center, starting with individuals already associated with the center, but now open to the public for apartments. Interested individuals can apply online. The work being done there is truly remarkable, and it is great to see ongoing developments.

- (d) Treasurer-Not Present-No Report

7. Reports of Committee Chairpersons

- (a) Finance Committee-updated earlier by Mr. Gary Lee-CAO
- (b) Executive Committee-

i Chairman Escajadillo aka Dr. Rocky reminded our commissioners about reaching out to County Council members updating them at least monthly on the progress of the Commission. He added that having that connection is going to be key for us. Dr. Rocky stated that "We have a lot to be proud of."

ii The pledge to the Code of Conduct and the confirmation form related to viewing the entire educational training session was sent to each individual commissioner. He asked that the commissioners be sure that they review all the material and provide any feedback before the end of business day tomorrow, Friday, June 16, 2023.

iii Mr. Escajadillo expressed gratitude for the comprehensive grant research report provided by 3i Networking, which offered the commission board a realistic understanding of the opportunities they are seeking and how they can maximize their resources to diversify funds for the benefit of Erie County. He found the report insightful and expressed appreciation for it. Furthermore, Mr. Escajadillo acknowledged the progress the Commission has made since January, despite encountering some challenges. He emphasized that they are making a positive impact and expressed pride in being part of the team. He recognized that there is still room for growth but was impressed with their accomplishments in a short period. Mr. Escajadillo highlighted the importance of spreading the word and utilizing social media to continue their efforts. He extended his appreciation for the insights shared.

(c) Grants Review Committee- updated earlier by Mr. Gary Lee-CAO

9. Unfinished Business-No Unfinished Business

10. New Business

The Grants Committee is recommending three organizations to receive an award from the Generational Impact Grant Initiative:

Erie's Black Wall Street (EBWS) has been granted \$100,000 through the Generational Impact Grant. The funds will be utilized for renovating and improving a space that will be accessible to the primary community. This space will include an office area, conference rooms, meeting rooms, as well as areas for creating multimedia products and utilizing adaptive equipment. These enhancements will enable Erie's Black Wall Street to provide programs and services to a wider range of constituents within Erie County. The details of the renovation project are described in the grant application and additional information submitted by Erie's Black Wall Street, which recommends the release of grant funding. To align with the Grant Award and Grant Agreement Recommendation, Black Wall Street will present invoices and written justifications to demonstrate the appropriate use of the funds to Diverse Erie. Monthly drawdown requests, with a minimum amount of \$25,000, can be submitted over a one-year period starting from the date of the grant award.

The Youth Leadership Institute of Erie (YLI) will receive a \$100,000 Generational Impact Grant for the renovation and improvement of its headquarters. This funding aims to enhance the facility to better serve the Youth Leadership Institute's programming, such as connected and alive programs, for the local community. The details of these programs are thoroughly explained in the grant application submitted by the Youth Leadership Institute of Erie. The recommendation is for the grant funding to be released to the Youth Leadership Institute upon providing invoices and written justifications that demonstrate compliance with the grant award and agreement. Monthly drawdown requests, with a minimum amount of \$25,000, can be submitted over a one-year period starting from the date of the grant award.

The Erie Center for Arts and Technology (ECAT) has been granted \$100,000 through the Generational Impact Grant. The funds will be utilized for the purchasing the Wayne Baptist Church. The details of

this project are provided in the grant application and additional information submitted by the Erie Center for Arts and Technology. The grant funding will be released to ECAT upon the submission of invoices and written justifications that demonstrate compliance with the grant award and agreement. Monthly drawdown requests, with a minimum amount of \$25,000, can be submitted over a one-year period starting from the date of the award.

A motion was made by Tiffany L. LaVette and seconded by Brandy Cortes to approve the recommendations made by the Grants Review committee to award Erie's Black Wallstreet (EBWS), Youth Leadership Institute (YLI) and Erie Center for Arts and Technology (ECAT) \$100,000 each from the Generational Impact Grant Initiative. All commissioners present voted in favor.

11. Adjournment

A motion was made by Tiffany L. LaVette and seconded by Brandy Cortes to adjourn the meeting at 6:45PM. All commissioners present voted in favor.

Attendees: Art Leopold, 3i Networking, and AJ Rao