

**ERIE COUNTY DIVERSE ERIE COMMISSION**  
**Meeting Minutes**

Thursday, April 20, 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/84734903506?pwd=aURjQUVHQXdhWS9jQkV0Um14dXI4UT09>

Meeting ID: 847 3490 3506  
Passcode: 494885

**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 6:11PM**

- (a) Dr. Sarah E. Carter-not present
- (b) Marie A. Wells (Mia)-not present
- (c) Saeedullah Taraky-not present

**2. Approval of the Agenda**

A Motion was made by Tiffany L. LaVette, and seconded by Brandy Cortes, to approve the March 30, 2023, agenda as presented. All commissioners present voted in favor.

**3. Hearing of the Public**

**Art Leopold:**

Mr. Leopold greeted the board and attendees at the meeting. He said that, in recent weeks, he had seen an air of optimism, certainly leading to opportunity in front of the County Council. Mr. Leopold added that perhaps his optimism is infectious. He said that we can now see this group and our community move forward. Mr. Leopold said that he is looking forward to seeing it. He is hopeful that some additional funds are made available to be managed, and he added that the commission should choose right out to enrich the BIPOC community, he said that he does certainly wish the commission well and he looks forward to the board’s future activities.

#### **4. Approval of the March 30, 2023, Meeting Minutes**

Motion to approve March 30, 2023, meeting minutes, was made by Jonathan Atkinson and seconded by Tiffany L. LaVette. All commissioners present voted in favor.

#### **5. Presentations:** None

#### **6. Report on Chief Administrative Officer: Gary Lee**

##### **Operational Matters:**

a. **Personnel:** No issue for discussion

b. **Budget:**

- i. The Finance Committee led by Commission Treasurer, Maria “Mia” Wells, includes Commissioner Paul Kokhanevich, and Dr. Sarah Carter, will begin their meeting schedule in May.
- ii. A review of March 2023 financial report, which consisted of the budget versus actual statement, expense reporting and supporting documents was reviewed and discussed in detail with Treasurer Wells.
- iii. Mr. Lee shared copies of the reports with the Finance Committee and with the Executive Committee members.
- iv. Mr. Lee said that the overall projected budget is in good financial shape, and Diverse Erie is operating within the financial parameters that are specific to the Commission.
- v. The financial statements for the three months ending on March 31st, 2023, are being prepared by our accounting firm with, which is Buseck, Barger, Bleil & Co., Inc.

##### **2. Media and Presentations:**

- i. Mr. Lee shared that he has participated in several TV interviews regarding the future direction and mission of the Commission. Also, the Commission has appeared in several news articles written by the Erie Times News.

- ii. Mr. Lee said that the Commission is getting its unity message out to the public via our website and social media. He stated that he believes that is a great way to show that the DEI Commission has turned the corner, and we are excited about moving forward.

### **3. Grants Development:**

- i. Mr. Lee stated that the grant review committee, consisting of Chairman Jonathan Atkinson, Commissioner Tiffany LaVette, and Commissioner Saeedullah Taraky, will meet monthly or more frequently to be determined by the chairperson.
- ii. On April 15th, the Grant Review Committee met to discuss and review in detail the invoices submitted by some of the award recipients for the Generational Impact Grant Round 1.
- iii. The Generational Impact Grant Round 2 review is in process. The Commission has a total of nineteen applications. We have notified the eleven applicants that they will be moving for further consideration in the process and eight applicants who did not meet the program guidelines. The Grants Review Committee is planning to announce the successful applications by May 26.
- iv. The mini grant initiative, which is a very important initiative that we are excited to roll out, will be between \$5,000. and \$25,000. for small businesses. The details, guidelines, and the review of the application were provided to the grant review committee.
- v. A press conference will be held the first week of May to roll out the details on this great initiative to the community.

### **4. Website Development and Branding:**

- i. Mr. Lee continues to meet weekly with Parker Phillips, regarding the strategic plan and branding process, such as website and social media outreach.

- ii. Mr. Lee explained that Parker Phillips is creating an action plan and a toolkit for the promotion and advertising of the Mini Grants Initiative and that the campaign will be shared with all the commissioners, with County Council, as well as the Office of the County Executive, and community organizations, so that they can place the information on their websites or social media accounts. Mr. Lee went on to say that the team is really excited about the announcement.
- iii. Mr. Lee said that it is very important for commission board members to continue to invite business associates, families, and friends to visit and join our social media platforms. He encouraged the board to share commission updates with their County Council representative and others in their circle of influences.
- iv. Mr. Lee stated that, overall, the April 12th meeting with County Council went well. Adding that it is imperative that commissioners connect with their county council representatives regularly. To help to improve the relationship between the commission and County Council.
- v. Mr. Lee stated that Attorney Wachter will soon submit a letter to the Solicitor for Erie County, Attorney Tom Talarico, regarding the next steps to the release of the \$3.5 million. He stated that the commission still needs a clear answer about what exactly is happening with these funds.
- vi. In addition, Mr. Lee stated some of the members of the County Council have indicated that they may be submitting a new ordinance for \$3.5 million or another amount to be invested with the DEI Commission. Mr. Lee again encouraged board members to reach out to their respective council representatives and talk with him or her about how important it is that they proceed with this investment.

- vii. The Statement of Financial Interest form from The State Ethics Commission is due by the end of business on April 21, 2023.
- viii. Mr. Lee announced that the board training session will be held on Saturday, May 6th. Mr. Lee describes instruction items that will recap policies and procedures, the vision, mission and goals of the commission, and some instructions from Roberts Rules of Order. He explained that the training session will be a great opportunity for the board to really get on one page, as it pertains to the Commission and where it is going.

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

A roll-call vote was conducted by Attorney Patricia Kennedy, for the commission board to approve the Report from the Chief Administrative Officer.

<b>Approval of the Report from the Chief Administrative Officer</b>			
	YEA	NO	ABSTAIN
Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo	X		
Jonathan Atkinson	X		
Brandy Cortes	X		
Gwendolyn White	X		
Tiffany LaVette	X		
Paul Kokhanevich	X		
Saeedullah Taraky	Not present		
Maria A. Wells	Not present		
Dr. Sarah Carter	Not present		

## 5. Reports of Commission Officers

- (a) Chairperson-

Dr. Ricardo “Rocky” Escajadillo, said that he was very encouraged after our meeting with the County Council last Wednesday, April 12th. He stated that at first, he had little bit of anxiety going into the meeting because he did not know what to expect, but by the end of the meeting, it looked like the DEI commission could move forward. He explained that, getting on the same page, opening the relationship channels in a positive manner can help to make the commission’s impact long term. He said that the meeting overall inspired him to be more excited about the rebirth of the DEI commission.

(b) Vice-Chairperson-No Report

(c) Secretary-

Secretary Cortez stated that she felt confident in asking Miss Devan Mitchell, Commission Assistant Administrator, to be her proxy when needed for the commission when she is not available to attend meetings, etc.

(d) Treasurer-Not Present-No Report

## **7. Reports of Committee Chairpersons**

(a) Finance Committee-No Report

(b) Executive Committee

i Dr. “Rocky” stated that the Executive Committee is looking for ideal times to meet. He said that it is tough to coordinate everybody’s daily work schedules to meet monthly or even bi-monthly. He said that the team is looking at finalizing a possible time, giving the example of Thursday evenings or even something later or at the beginning of the week. Rocky encouraged and thanked the committee members and added that he had seen these meetings that occur on a Saturday. He thanked the committee members for getting involved, for their time, and their energy. He said that we all appreciate what was already being done for the committee as we move forward.

(c) Grants Committee

i Vice-Chairman Jonathan Atkinson, said that the Grants Review committee met on April 15<sup>th</sup>, to discuss recommendations made by Mr. Lee regarding next steps for Generational Impact Grant Round 1 Awardees, and the steps required to formally disperse funds.

ii Mr. Atkinson said that it is his understanding that, should all recommendations have been completed by grantees, the full commission board will vote to disperse funds in two phases. Initially, and then at a midway point, so that commission board members may hear from, review, and witness progress made by the awardees on their respective projects.

iii The consulting group 3i Networking provided the team with a list of 11 applications, which meet the requirements outlined in our program guidelines. Mr. Atkinson said that the Grants Review Committee discussed the review process for Generational Impact Grants Round 2 and the next steps to be taken.

iv Mr. Atkinson stated that the 11 applications that are eligible, include Erie's Black Wall Street, R.L. Gaines Community Center, John F. Kennedy Center, Journey to a Trauma Informed Life, Debais Capital, LLC, Lovely Home Rentals, Pineapple Eddie's, Christian Ministries, Greater Calvary Full Gospel Baptist Church, Youth Leadership Institute, and one is yet to mentioned.

v The grants review team will begin the process of interviewing 6 to 8 applicants, so that the commission board may learn more about their respective program models and how they intend to cultivate growth within our community. The team will then make recommendations to the commission of the top four candidates to be approved as grant award amount of \$100,000 for each award. Mr. Atkinson added that,

*tentatively* those selections will be made by our next commission board meeting.

vi Mr. Atkinson said that The Small Business Mini Grant Initiative, designed to support small businesses who serve the BIPOC community, will be formally introduced at a press conference to the public in the first week of May 2023.

## 8. **Unfinished Business**-No Unfinished Business

### 9. **New Business**

Commissioner Tiffany LaVette provided an update on the Small Business Loan Fund, from the Loan/Grant Review committee, which had approved two additional loans for BIPOC businesses. The businesses approved were an energy drink called Marva Morris and CVC (Crime Victim's Center), which needed funding to continue their projects while waiting for the loan approval process.

Request for Approval of Reimbursement Invoices for Generational Impact Grant Round 1 awardees.

Mr. Lee explained the reasons for the reimbursement process of the Generational Impact Grant Initiative, as being the most productive and the most effective way for the commission board to ensure that the grant funds are being utilized for what the awarded organizations say they are going to be utilized for.

Mr. Gary Lee also mentioned that it is from an educational standpoint that the reimbursement process is being brought to the full board. He said that the full board's involvement in this process initially is just so that everyone has an opportunity to be aware of what it is that they would be voting on as a commission board member. He explained that going forward, he would recommend that the process be delegated to the Grant Review Committee along with the Chief Administrative Officer.

On April 11, 2023, a review was conducted by Mr. Gary Lee, Chief Administrative Officer. Mr. Lee found that The Mercy Center for Women has submitted all the required documentation to meet the Commissions full reporting requirements. He recommends Mercy Center for Women receive \$100,000 of the \$100,000 amount for reimbursement requested. The Commission plans to disburse funds in two phases, provided that all

recommendations have been completed by the grantees. The first phase will be an initial release of funds, followed by a midway point release to review progress made by the awardees on their respective projects.

Motion to approve Mr. Lee’s recommendation for the Reimbursement Invoices for the Mercy Center for Women, was made by Tiffany LaVette and seconded by Vice-Chairperson Jonathan Atkinson.

Attorney Patricia Kennedy took a roll-call vote for the approval of Reimbursement Invoices for the Mercy center for Women, in the amount \$100,000.

\$100,000 Reimbursement Invoice to the Mercy Center for Women (MCW)			
	YEA	NO	ABSTAIN
Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo	X		
Maria A. Wells-No vote Not Present			
Saeedullah Taraky-No vote Not Present			
Brandy Cortes	X		
Jonathan Atkinson	X		
Tiffany LaVette	X		
Dr. Sarah E. Carter-No vote Not Present			
Gwendolyn White	X		
Paul Kokhanevich	X		

The East Side Renaissance project, with an initial review conducted on April 11th and a second review on April 18th after additional information was provided. The recommended approval amount is \$125,000, which is 50% of the total requested amount. Additional funds may be released within 30 to 60 days, allowing for an on-site review of the project. However, payment cannot be released until the lawsuit between the Commission and East Side Renaissance has been dismissed, and this condition has been shared with the plaintiffs’ attorney. The board is voting on whether to approve the invoices for this project, with the payment to be released only after the litigation has been settled.

There was a brief discussion regarding the question posed by Commissioner Gwendolyn White. Ms. White said that although she agrees with the recommendation that Mr. Lee provided for Eastside Renaissance, she asked does his recommendation fall on the lines of extortion that we only will give the money if they dismiss the pending lawsuit against the DEI Commission.

Mr. Lee responded by saying that after talking with our attorney, it is not uncommon that when an organization or entity is suing another party for the two parties to work out the agreement or dismissal of the suit before any type of payment or release of funds are done.

Motion to approve the Reimbursement Invoices for the Eastside Renaissance (ESR), contingent upon the dismissal of the pending legal matter was made by Tiffany LaVette and seconded by Vice-Chairman Jonathan Atkinson

Attorney Patricia Kennedy took a roll-call vote for the approval of Reimbursement Invoices for the Eastside Renaissance (ESR)

\$250,000 Reimbursement Invoice to the Eastside Renaissance (ESR)			
	YEA	NO	ABSTAIN
Paul Kokhanevich	X		
Brandy Cortes	X		
Tiffany LaVette	X		
Gwendolyn White	X		
Jonathan Atkinson	X		
Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo	X		
Dr. Sarah E. Cater-No Vote-Not Present			
Saeedullah Taraky-No Vote-Not Present			
Maria A. Wells-No Vote-Not Present			

The Greater Area Economic Development Corporation's data was last reviewed on April 11th, with an updated review on April 18th, 2023. The

recommended approval amount is \$97,987.47, but the organization still needs to provide a detailed breakdown of the project plan addressing key areas such as scope of work, who will be performing the work, breakdown of cost, and project timeline. Additional funds may be released within 30 to 60 days, allowing for an on-site review of the project. However, payment cannot be released until the lawsuit between the Commission and the claimants has been dismissed, and this condition has been shared with the plaintiffs' attorney.

Motion to approve the Reimbursement Invoices for the Greater Erie Economic Development Corporation (GEEDC), contingent upon the dismissal of the pending lawsuit was made by Tiffany LaVette and seconded by Jonathan Atkinson.

Attorney Patricia Kennedy took a roll-call vote for the approval of reimbursement Invoices for the Greater Erie Economic Development Corporation (GEEDC).

\$97,987.47 Reimbursement Invoice to the Greater Erie Economic Development Corporation (GEEDC)			
	YEA	NO	ABSTAIN
Brandy Cortes	X		
Gwendolyn White	X		
Tiffany LaVette	X		
Paul Kokhanevich	X		
Saeedullah Taraky-No Vote-Not Present			
Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo	X		
Dr. Sarah E. Cater-No Vote-Not Present			
Maria A. Wells-No Vote-Not Present			
Jonathan Atkinson	X		

## 10. **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, Tyrone Clark, Curtis Jones, Jr. Lisa Sayers-Thompson, and AJ Rao