

ERIE COUNTY DIVERSE ERIE COMMISSION

Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, March 1, 2023

Blasco Library-Admiral Room

160 East Front Street, Erie, PA 16507 at 6:00 P.M.

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84835532553?pwd=YVdYRFA1cmphU09oY0J6aUIYcm>

FvUT09

Meeting ID: 848 3553 2553

Passcode: 238585

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

1. **Call to Order/Roll Call 6:00PM**
 - (a) **All present**

2. **Approval of the Agenda**

Motion was made by Jonathan Atkinson and seconded by Marie Wells, to approve the March 1, 2023, agenda. All commissioners present voted in favor.

3. **Introduction of New Commissioner**

Paul Kokhanevich Thanked the commissioners for welcoming him to be a part of this important initiative. Added that he came from Ukraine at age 13 to the United States was able to start from nothing and create a successful business with his brother. He adds that from his knowledge and experience gained by working in the community, helps him to strive to help other Ukrainians that are starting out in the same position.

4. **Election of Officers**

Attorney Tim Wachter explained to the audience, and the commission board members the process of electing officers for the board, adding that the nominations were previously tabled and that according to the by-laws for Diverse Erie, officers should be identified and seated at the beginning of every year. Tiffany LaVette remarked with a question from someone in the public as to whether some of the new commissioners were legally seated, she said that there

may be reason to believe that any persons seated on the board must be a naturalized citizen. Mrs. LaVette said to ensure that there are no votes be made now or in the future that will not be counted going forward. Mrs. LaVette referred to Section 9 of the Home Charter Rules. There was a brief discussion and research done during the meeting by Attorney Tim Wachter to help substantiate the claims, regarding the New Americans or citizen presently on the commission board. There was no such rule, law found at that time. Ms. White advised that since the subject had been mentioned during the meeting, that the answer should be accepted for the record and that the meeting should continue without further discussion.

Nominations for Chairperson

A nomination was made by Brandy Cortes to nominate Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo as chairperson for the Diverse Erie Commission board.

A nomination was made by Gwendolyn White to nominate Tiffany LaVette as chairperson for the Diverse Erie Commission board.

A motion was made by Tiffany LaVette and seconded by Marie Wells, to close the nominations for chairperson for the Diverse Erie Commission board. All commissioners present voted in favor.

A roll call vote was taken by attorney Tim Wachter, and majority commissioners voted to seat Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo, as chairperson for the Diverse Erie Commission.

Nominations for Chairperson			
Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo			
	YEA	NO	ABSTAIN
Gwendolyn White		X	
Brandy Cortes	X		
Jonathan Atkinson		X	
Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo	X		
Maria A. Wells	X		

Saeedullah Taraky	X		
Paul Kokhanevich	X		
Tiffany LaVette		X	
Dr. Sarah Carter		X	

Nomination for Vice-Chairperson

Brandy Cortes made a nomination, to nominate Jonathan Atkinson as Vice-Chairperson for the Diverse Erie Commission board.

Gwendolyn White made a nomination, to nominate Tiffany LaVette as Vice-Chairperson for the Diverse Erie Commission board.

All commissioners present voted in favor of closing the nominations for Vice-Chairperson for the Diverse Erie commission board. None opposed.

A roll call vote was taken by Attorney Tim Wachter, and commissioners unanimously voted to seat Jonathan Atkinson as Vice-Chairperson of the Diverse Erie Commission board.

Nominations for Vice-Chairperson			
Jonathan Atkinson			
	YEA	NO	ABSTAIN
Tiffany LaVette	X		
Dr. Sarah Cater	X		
Gwendolyn White	X		
Brandy Cortes	X		
Jonathan Atkinson	X		
Maria A. Wells	X		
Saeedullah Taraky	X		
Paul Kokhanevich	X		
Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo	X		

Nomination for Secretary

Tiffany LaVette made a nomination, to nominate Brandy Cortes as Secretary for the Diverse Erie Commission board.

A motion was made by Tiffany LaVette and seconded by Marie Wells to close the nominations for secretary for the Diverse Erie Commission board. All commissioners present voted in favor.

A voice vote was taken by Attorney Tim Wachter, and commissioners unanimously voted in favor of Brandy Cortes as Secretary for the Diverse Erie Commission board.

Nomination for Treasurer

Tiffany LaVette made a nomination nominate Dr. Sarah Carter as Treasurer for the Diverse Erie Commission board.

Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo made a nomination to nominate Marie Wells as Treasurer for the Diverse Erie Commission board.

A motion was made by Gwendolyn White and seconded by Brandy Cortes to close the nominations for treasurer for the Diverse Erie Commission board. All commissioners present voted in favor.

A roll call vote was taken by Attorney Tim Wachter, and majority commissioners voted to seat Marie Wells, as Treasurer for the Diverse Erie Commission.

Nominations for Treasurer			
Dr. Sarah Carter			
	YEA	NO	ABSTAIN
Tiffany LaVette	X		
Dr. Sarah Cater	X		
Gwendolyn White	X		
Brandy Cortes		X	
Jonathan Atkinson	X		
Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo		X	

Maria A. Wells		X	
Saeedullah Taraky		X	
Paul Kokhanevich		X	

Nominations for Treasurer			
Marie Wells			
	YEA	NO	ABSTAIN
Tiffany LaVette		X	
Dr. Sarah Carter		X	
Gwendolyn White		X	
Brandy Cortes	X		
Jonathan Atkinson		X	
Maria A. Wells	X		
Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo	X		
Saeedullah Taraky	X		
Paul Kokhanevich	X		

The new Chairman of the Diverse Erie Commission board, Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo, briefly spoke to the commissioners and the audience members. Thanking them all for their time and support, and for the votes that elected him. He said that he is excited and is to dedicate himself to do what is best for the community in helping to make an impactful, generational change.

Vice-Chairman, Jonathan Atkinson, congratulated the other newly elected officers, he said that it is an honor to work beside the team and that he is looking forward to working beside the team.

Brandy Cortes is the new secretary and she thanked everybody for coming to the meeting and supporting the commission. She remarked that the process of seating a full board took some time, and that is why it appeared to have a lack of

transparency. Ms. Cortes did express her sincere appreciation for the patience and understanding from the public. She said that volunteering for any kind of board has a learning process and although it is an exciting process it deserves dedication and commitment, and she was encouraged to join and commit the best of her ability to making Erie County a better place for the future.

5. **Hearing from the Public**

(a) **Dalen Hooks** spoke to the newly seated commission board about the lack of transparency the commission appears to have in the public eye. He mentioned that he had been to just one other meeting and had been observing. He said that he feels like this is a very important commission, and this is the perfect opportunity for all the new board members to do the right thing by the Black community. Mr. Hooks stated that since, a lot of the new board members don't even have a lot of experience or education they should get "Roberts Rules of Order" book sold online and is at the library. He went on to say that the new commissioners would be prepared to make the meetings quicker and cleaner if they all had an understanding of how the process works. Mr. Hooks disagreed with Commissioner Cortes saying that this is a learning process and he stated, "This is something that you should be happy for, and this is something that you should show up and take a little bit more seriously." Mr. Hooks, then asked the Diverse Erie CAO what he was doing to support the three Black ladies on the board since he did not see many Black people on the board. He insisted that the community is demanding more transparency around the issues of the commission's work. And he urged the new commissioners put out a public statement or provide a little bit more insight on what exactly is going on with the commission. He stated that the political games should come to a halt and that there be a lot more compassion, and empathy for the poor disproportionately affected by the pandemic and can benefit from the release of appropriated funds. Mr. Hooks pledged to continue to come to Diverse Erie regular meetings

until he hears from the board when the funds will be released into the community.

(b) **Valeria Perkins** a resident of the city Erie, PA, wanted to speak to the Commission, about Ordinance 72 under which this whole Commission was established, she stated that the ordinance references no less than 30 times the disparities between Black people in Erie and white people in Erie. Ms. Perkins said that this board does not represent the people who the board was created to address the issues of and stated that that was the first political game. The second one that Ms. Perkins regarded the commission board to do the right thing with the money, monies that she said were specifically designated for the Black people in Erie County.

(c) **Former County Councilman Carl Anderson**

One of the original creators of the resolution that Ms. Valeria Perkins had just referred to, spoke to the commissioners and audience members about how he and others think that County Executive Brenton Davis has begun a process to create economic disruption by lying, bullying, and sending threats, including putting county government at risk for potential lawsuits. To create an atmosphere of chaos and divisiveness, inequity, uncertainty, and the undermining of people in our community. Mr. Anderson said that it is his sincere hope that the commission board would come together in unity by uplifting each other and our community. Stating that the makeup of this board should not create a divisive atmosphere, and that's why it's even become more important for this commission to be above reproach and to protect the taxpaying citizens of this community. Mr. Anderson stated that he is the one that brought up about the citizenship of board members. He explained that he noticed the makeup of the new commission board and feels these positions were intentionally being set to discourage progress in Erie County. He further explained that the citizen question was relevant because the board should be legitimized to ensure that every vote taken

from here moving forward could continue to open this county for potential lawsuits. On behalf of the taxpayers of Erie County he asked the new commission board members to "Get yourselves together," with no disrespect to the New Americans joining the board. He mentioned that this group is a branch of the elected officials who are going to and will have to be consistent with those other elected officials and to the United States Constitution and the Pennsylvania Constitution. Before the start of taking votes just to not giving away money.

(d) **Art Leopold** greeted the new commission board and audience members. Mr. Leopold stated that at the last meeting he talked about the report done by a team from Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, shows that disparities in educational attainment, occupational opportunity, and employment and wages reduced GDP by more than \$70 trillion over the past 30 years. That's a staggering loss that limits their economic future and their competitiveness in the global economy. He stated that he has also forward information from the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland, in this *Commentary*, they documented entrepreneurial income and investments for households of different racial backgrounds and provide estimates of investment yields. To find that an average Black household engaged in entrepreneurial activity has a higher rate of return on its business followed by Hispanic households and white households, a circumstance which makes low entrepreneurship rates among Black and Hispanic communities appear even more puzzling. Mr. Art is a very compassionate person and a community advocate for social justices, he has always been a strong supporter of Diverse Erie and its mission, and he asked for some review of these studies and offers examples of how things can and should be done here in Erie County to help to advance the BIPOC communities through funding efforts. (See attached documents)

(e) **Tyler Titus** Resident in the city of Erie, said as directly as he could that he feels there is a lot at stake right now, and mentioned that he knows that this initiative is a beacon of hope for some Black women business owners. Mr. Titus said that even though unfortunately, the board members had been pulled into a very, very political game, it's now their responsibility to create a generational impact through the votes that will be taken that will impact the future of Black business and their families in Erie County.

(f) **Kathy Schaaf** is also a resident of the city of Erie and came to the meeting to share her concern for the housing sector of the city. She stated that she recently noticed that more and more people are buying up housing in an LLC and then renting at high rates. Ms. Schaaf said that she would like to see Diverse Erie invest funds to develop more affordable home ownership program for the BIPOC communities.

(g) **Deonte Cooley** a citizen of the city of Erie, said that he was not sure what the commission does, but said that it looked to him that, everybody in the room looked fairly comfortable in the space and that he'd intent to learn a lot of things. He expressed that he still did not understand how people can sit around, and advocate for only certain people, when nobody in the room hit the streets, not just create a multi-media post, in order to get the knowledge needed to get an actual understanding and learning what the people need that they are supposed to advocate for. Mr. Cooley said those are tactics he has used to engage with the communities he is advocating for. He said that if the board is not willing to do the foot work that he does, they should not expect trust from the underserved communities that needing funding to help to uplift them. By the end of thing as he sees it, is people don't trust nor believe that the help of Diverse Erie Commission may have will actually help those that we say will help. He said with the upmost respect, that the commission board does not look to him to be here to serve the BIPOC community, not even to

teach the younger generations of Black business owners or young Black entrepreneurs. He stated that the commissioners should by any means necessary be willing and able to knock on doors to help those that they really intend on helping in the BIPOC communities of Erie County, before making decisions for them.

(h) **District 3 of County Councilwoman-Mary Rennie** is a resident of the city of Erie and is part of the legislative body that passed resolution #43 to 2020 declaring racism a public health crisis, and ordinance #72 of 2021 creating and establishing, Erie County Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion commission. Ms. Rennie stated that all boards and authorities are created and set up to provide expertise, public participation, transparency, and independence from county government. meaning that the commission board members will make independent decisions that are well considered. And continued to say that, this body was created by county council, not the county executives but by county council, and was given well defined authority and responsibilities which are laid out within the ordinance. Ms. Rennie reminded the commissioners, that by law, each county council member is entitled to make one appointment to the commission board, and that there should never be any attempts to exert undue influence over the decisions their appointment makes as a member of the commission board. Ms. Rennie added that no one has the authority to remove a member of the commission board, without serious just cause, noting that not even the other members of the commission do not have the power to remove other members. She also stated that the mission and agenda of the of Diverse Erie is crystal clear, it is to conduct commission business with a quorum of existing members. She said that, each of the new commission members have that authority, responsibility, and the obligation, to a commission that has been thrown into a state of uncertainty and chaos by the actions of one man, but they have been enabled and

abetted by a lack of leadership and weak advice. Ms. Rennie mentioned that, it is to the point that the only payments made by this commission are to individuals who are not fulfilling their obligations. Ms. Rennie said that her assessment is that they are not acting in the good of the public trust. She referred to a news report she'd saw the night before and with a good deal of dismay, saw what looked like a worthy entrepreneurial efforts and economic development has been stymied or delayed, in Erie County and the city. So, she implored, urged, even demanded that this new body do its job. She asked the board members to approve and release funding to worthy projects. She then added that the board should take whatever actions necessary to assert its authority as defined by the county of Erie, and to resist those who would sandbag its efforts.

(i) **District 1 County Councilman-Terry Scutella** Mr. Scutella joined the meeting with great concerns from some citizens who called him to say that there are organizations that have not been given money from the Diverse Erie grant initiative. He said that he hopes that there is no one person whispering into the ears of the commissioners and influencing or dictating their decisions or votes. Mr. Scutella said that he had not met anyone on the board yet, but he said that he hopes that, that person is not currently seating on the board. He asked when the money will go out and how can county council help if there is a problem getting the funds out to the organizations that have been approved for the money. telling them that the money cannot be released.

(j) **District 2 County Councilman-Andre Horton**-Mr. Horton shared with the new commissioners that he is saddened by the events that this commission board has been experiencing. He said that he thinks that the commission board should be reinstated, and it should be able to control \$5,000,000 to the new American population and \$5,000,000 to the African American population. He explained that whereas the turn of

Erie County declares that the people of Erie County desire to improve focus on equity for all of us. He reminded the room of the history for Blacks in America has been under either slavery or Jim Crow laws, which subjected Black people to tremendous hardship all areas of life. He added this initiative was designed to address some of those disparities between Blacks and whites in every aspect of life, from healthcare, affordable housing, well paid jobs, economic and educational opportunities. Mr. Horton stated real true historic facts that helped support the reason the commission was created and why it is imperative for the commission to be able to progress in its mission and vision. He stated more truths saying "This is your county history, this is American history, and its Black history. Black history is American history. It is a shared history. It is a rich history. It's one with lots of warts and flaws and marks and bruises." Mr. Horton went on to say that as creators of the Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion Commission, he, and Carl Anderson both watched as it without taking any action to prevent it be "watered down to nothing." He said that it does not matter to him that the board is now seated, but that it is seated with volunteers that are intentionally appointed to disregard the need of the Black population in Erie County. He suggested that the county Executive is directly involved in the destruction of the commission to suit his own agenda. Mr. Horton said that the County Executive, he could take it to the bank. He is going to fight him on every chance he can get on it, because this is what subscript and racism looks like.

Mr. Horton described the relationship between new Americans and African Americans, as being thrown all together now in one group, instead of just Americas, so they throw us all together. But noted that if new Americans wanted or needed to assimilate, they could whereas a Black person could not. Discrimination for certain groups of people is not the same.

He said that if this group anticipates voting to have his appointment, Tiffany LaVette removed, they should know that

they have no authority to do so and nor does the County Executive. He stated that he does not care what the County Executive Brenton Davis says we should just get used to seeing Tiffany here at meeting and out supporting the commission and its work.

Mr. Horton added that he had just been at NACo with the county executive and a few others. He said that the federal government provided Erie County with \$52.6M as a part of the American rescue plan Act, and that our community isn't getting their share of the American rescue plan funds. He said that "They say this should always be a focus on the historically discriminated groups, IE Black folks." Finally, Mr. Horton addressed Mr. Lee, demanding that he "get the damn money out!" emphasizing that the Black communities in Erie County are suffering and Black owned businesses are dying. He said that if Mr. Lee as the CAO for the commission can hold a meeting in the evening so that more people can attend, that would be great.

(k) **Curtis L. Jones, Jr.** commented as a citizen of the city of Erie and explained that he had had the privilege of responsibility of serving the City Council for 13 years in the City of Erie. Mr. Jones said that he has served on boards and authorities ranging from nonprofits to financial, fiscal, economic development boards over the last 20 years. He said that, one of the things that he thinks is really important about being on a board is the responsibility to uphold. Mr. Jones added that it doesn't matter what hue of human is or racial background, even if it's an all-white commission, the expectations are the same to meet the needs of the certain people and certain community members that have been underrepresented for a long time. He urged the commission to do the work that the commission was set in place to do. Stating that if that happens, every people group gets better, the entire community will be empowered, and we can breakdown some of the silos that have been ever so present in

our community. He added, another important piece of the commission’s work is to diversify its funding sources, will help increase the opportunities need to further empower the people.

(l) **Curtis Lofton** stated that he is an Erie city resident and a business owner. He wanted to repeat what Mr. Horton said earlier in the evening regarding getting the money to the people in the community that need funding to help Black businesses grow or survive.

6. Consideration of legal dispute with the County over removal of Commissioners

Motion was made by Brandy Cortes and seconded by Marie Wells, to table the discussion regarding the status of the legal dispute involving three commission board members.

A roll call vote was taken by Attorney Tim Wachter, to table the discussion regarding the status of the removal/dispute of three commission board members.

	YEA	NO	ABSTAIN
Tiffany LaVette	X		
Dr. Sarah Carter	X		
Gwendolyn White	X		
Brandy Cortes	X		
Jonathan Atkinson	X		
Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo	X		
Jonathan Atkinson	X		
Maria A. Wells	X		
Saeedullah Taraky	X		
Paul Kokhanevich	X		

7. Approval of the February 15, 2023, Meeting Minutes

Motion was made by Gwendolyn White and seconded by Tiffany LaVette, to approve the meeting minutes for the February 15, 2023, with corrections.

Corrections: The update on the 2023 collection for the dollars from the County Council. Any balance remaining from the \$3.5M appropriated by the former council in 2021 was not distributed during 2022.

8. **Presentations** None

9. **Report of Chief Administrative Officer – Gary N. Lee**

Operational Matters:

(I) Personnel

(i) Mr. Lee referenced the personnel matter of that will be discussed regarding the annual increase for office staff members during an executive session.

(II) Budget

(i) The Commission is discussing the requirement with Maloney, Reed, and Scarpitti, and Company providing services concerning the 2023 U.S. Department of Treasury Compliance requirements. The firm will be submitting a letter of engagement, which Mr. Lee will be sharing with the board.

(ii) Mr. Lee provided a copy of our Diverse Erie 2022 annual report and financial statements to County Council and the Office of the County Executive.

(iii) Erie County Council has asked Mr. Lee to come down, share, and review the annual report at the courthouse March 2, 2023, at 3:30 PM. Mr. Lee asked that if anyone on the commissioners that are available, please feel free, free to join him for the meeting.

(III) Media and Presentation

(IV) The Diverse Erie Annual Report has been prepared for posting to our website and all other social media platforms. Ms. White pointed out that the report included a minor error. She said that the Generational

Impact Grant Initiative's release date was in July 2022 not in July 2021.

(V) Grants Development

- (i) The small business grant initiative is a \$5,000-\$25,000 for small businesses in the BIPOC community it is the commission's next key project. He said that we going to be waiting for direction from the board on that. The initiative will be one of the commission's top priorities to help get the money out to the business owners that need this type of grant opportunity.
- (ii) Generational Impact Grant the board has had requested that an overview of all the invoices submitted by the awardees, Greater Erie Economic Development Corporation, and Eastside Renaissance. The report has been completed, and Mr. Lee will be sharing the findings with the board upon a scheduled meeting.

(VI) Website Development and Branding

- (i) The website and branding development Mr. Lee continue to meet with the team at Parker Phillips regarding their strategic plan and the branding process on our website development. Mr. Lee said that he would also encourage as he has done before each one of the board members and audience to take a look at the website, and to please join, follow and share.
- (ii) Mr. Lee reminded the commissioners that they should have the State Ethics Commission's financial statements submitted before March 31st.

(VII) Other Key items

- (i) Mr. Lee any questions or any concerns from Commissioner White in reference to the invoices

submitted, to county government, Department of Finance, back in December 2022 for \$3.5 million. Finance did not have record of that invoice requested. Nor has Tiffany LaVette shared a copy with Mr. Lee to date.

- (ii) He added that, County Council invested \$3.5 million in December of 2021 in the DEI Commission, but that no further money was appropriated in future budgets. Further, Mr. Lee noted that once the Commission can show that it has leveraged its funding through securing investments from entities other than the County, the County would be more likely to appropriate additional funds to the Commission. Mr. Lee noted that the Commission is able to attempt to secure those funds now that the Commission has a full board.

Motion was made by Brandy Cortes and seconded by Marie Wells, to approve the Report of the Chief Administrative Officer. Gwendolyn White was opposed to the approval of the CAO report.

10. **Reports of Commission Officers** There are no officers for these positions.

- (a) Chairperson
 - i
- (b) Vice-Chairperson
 - i
- (c) Secretary
 - i
- (d) Treasurer

11. **Reports of Committee Chairpersons**

- (a) Finance Committee
 - i
- (b) Executive Committee

i
(c) Grants Committee

i

12. **Unfinished Business**

Motion was made by Tiffany LaVette and seconded by Gwendolyn White, to table the executive session and the new business item until the next meeting. All in favor.

13. **New Business**

14. **Adjournment**

Motion was made by Gwendolyn White and seconded by Tiffany LaVette to adjourn the meeting at 8:10PM. All commissioners present voted in favor.

Attendees: Art Leopold; Curtis L. Jones, Jr.; Andre Horton; Deonte Cooley; Valeria Perkins; Carl Anderson; Curtis C. Lofton; Marissa Thomas; Philip Ward, AJ Rao; Lisa Thompson-Sayers; Ellen Schauerman; Mary Rennie; Mel Witherspoon; Bishop Curtis L. Jones, Sr.; Dalen Hooks; Regina Gaston; Shawn Thompson; Kathy Schaaf; Tyler Titus; Terry Scutella; Kathy Lutz & Katrina (last name unknown)