

ERIE COUNTY DIVERSE ERIE COMMISSION

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, May 18, 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/87020924814?pwd=ZmNPckZUaHdYRytOa2FobVBkK1NKUT09>

Meeting ID: 870 2092 4814

Passcode: 215291

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** 5:59PM
 - (a) Marie A. Wells (Mia)-not present

2. **Approval of the Agenda**

A Motion was made by Jonathan Atkinson, and seconded by Brandy Cortes, to approve the May 18, 2023, agenda as presented. All commissioners present voted in favor.

3. **Hearing of the Public**

Art Leopold:

4. Mr. Leopold expressed his satisfaction with the positive development that aligns with the goals of Diverse Erie's efforts. He concurred with County Councilman Andre Horton's suggestion that the process could be made more user-friendly and efficient, and he expressed confidence in our team's commitment to exploring ways to enhance it. He pondered the potential lasting impact on future generations and expressed interest in learning more about our plans for business development and promoting homeownership. Mr. Leopold noted that he had not heard much about the educational aspect or training but expressed excitement about the extent of our ambitions in that area. Once again, he congratulated the commission board on its achievements and eagerly looks forward to its continued dedication.

5. **Approval of the April 20, 2023, Meeting Minutes**

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

6. **Presentations:** None

7. **Report on Chief Administrative Officer: Gary Lee**

Operational Matters:

1. **Personnel:**

- a. No issue for discussion

2. **Budget:**

- a. Mr. Lee informed the commission board that the Finance Committee held a meeting on May 10th, 2023, during which they discussed and analyzed the following topics:

- i. The April 2023 financial report, which included a comparison between the budget and actual banking statements, expense report, and supporting documents, was thoroughly examined. He provided the board with some notable highlights from the budget versus actual report. Stating that, in April, Diverse Erie had a total in expenses that amounted to \$39,935, with a year-to-date total of \$148,016. Mr Lee said that our budget allocation for this period is \$462,300, leaving us with an available balance of \$314,284.
- ii. He continued, saying that one area of focus discussed with the Finance Committee was the 2023 legal services budget, set at \$40,000. As of now, the commission's expenses in this category have exceeded the budget, reaching \$41,654 due to ongoing litigation. Mr. Lee stated that the Finance Committee will evaluate this figure and provide recommendations to the full board.
- iii. Additionally, Mr. Lee informed the commissioners that the accountant responsible for Diverse Erie has completed the financial statements for the first quarter ending on March 31st, 2023. He further mentioned that these statements have been distributed to both the Finance Committee and the Executive Committee. Furthermore, copies of the financial statements have been submitted to the County Council and the Office of the County Executive.
- iv. Mr. Lee stated that, the overall budget for the Diverse Erie Commission is in a favorable state, with a bank balance of \$2.5 million, that will continue to be closely monitored moving forward.

3. Media and Presentations:

- i. Mr. Lee played an active role in several TV interviews where he discussed the Small Business Mini Grant Initiative, which was led by the commission.
- ii. The initial press conference held on May 1, 2023, was deemed successful, with Chairman Brian Shank, Mayor Schember, and Councilman Andre Horton delivering speeches and being present at the event. However, for future events, the aim is to select a time that accommodates the availability of more commissioners. Given the limited time limit, close collaboration took place with a public relations company to customize the event in a way that aligned with the schedules of elected officials and the media. Moving forward, the goal is to schedule events that allow for greater participation from commissioners.
- iii. On May 12th, Mr. Lee conducted a workshop titled "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: Is it just a hashtag or Is it real?" at the Jefferson Educational Society. The workshop received high praise and was successful in delivering its objectives. Mr. Lee described the key highlights from the presentation:
 1. Mindset: A central theme of the workshop was the importance of adopting an abundance mindset rather than a scarcity mindset. By embracing abundance, individuals can foster a mindset of growth, collaboration, and inclusivity.
 2. Leadership and Accountability: It was emphasized that individuals should take on leadership roles and hold elected officials, as well as civic and business leaders, accountable for their actions and decisions regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion. Active participation and engagement are necessary for meaningful change.
 3. Effective Practices: Identifying and implementing effective practices was highlighted as an essential step. It is important to recognize and

support initiatives that have proven to be successful in promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion. At the same time, ineffective practices should be identified and eliminated to make room for more impactful strategies.

4. **Data-driven Approach:** The workshop stressed the significance of utilizing data to measure progress and identify areas for improvement. By collecting and analyzing relevant data, stakeholders can gain insights into the current state of diversity, equity, and inclusion and explore opportunities for further initiatives within the region.

Overall, the workshop aimed to challenge participants to move beyond surface-level discussions and take tangible actions to create a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive community.

Mr. Lee said that he was personally delighted to have the opportunity to deliver this presentation, and it was a gratifying experience overall.

4. Grants Development:

- a. The Grants Development update regarding the Generational Impact Grants Round One reimbursement process, Mr. Lee shared positive news with the commission board. He announced that Mercy Center for Women has received their first investment check of \$50,000 from the Commission. To ensure that the project aligns with the scope of work outlined in their application, a site visit was conducted on May 2nd by the team at 3i Networking, along with Mr. Lee. The project was found to meet the requirements set by the Commission and is eligible for the second investment check of \$50,000, which is scheduled to be disbursed this week. This progress indicates that the project is on track and successfully progressing towards its goals.
- b. Regarding the Eastside Renaissance Project (ESR), significant progress has been made. An agreement has been prepared and signed by both ESR and the Commission. The agreement outlines that upon reimbursement of the \$250,000 previously paid by the Commission, ESR will withdraw their claim and discontinue any further legal action with prejudice. Once the signed agreement is received by the Commission, they will release an investment check of \$125,000 to ESR this week. This indicates a positive step forward in resolving the issue and ensuring that the project can continue.
- c. Furthermore, the organization is currently in the process of preparing a second-tranche reimbursement of invoices. To ensure compliance with the project's requirements, a site visit will be conducted by the Commission team before releasing the second check.

Overall, these developments demonstrate progress in resolving the matter with ESR and provide a pathway for continued collaboration and support for the project.

- d. The Greater Erie Economic Development Corporation. While some information has been submitted, there are still unresolved questions pertaining to the scope of work, project schedule, details of the work, and the entities involved in carrying out the work.
- e. In addition to the outstanding information, there is a need for The Greater Erie Economic Development Corporation to address the marketing strategy aimed at attracting BIPOC businesses to the facility. This aspect requires attention to ensure inclusivity and diversity in the project.

- f. Furthermore, there are financial matters that need to be addressed based on the Organization's application. These matters are significant and necessitate thorough review and attention. To address these issues, the Commission will be preparing a letter that specifically outlines these matters. The letter will undergo a review process by the commission's attorney to ensure accuracy and appropriateness before being sent to The Greater Erie Economic Development Corporation.

By taking these steps, the Commission is actively working to resolve the outstanding questions, address the marketing strategy, and address the financial matters related to The Greater Erie Economic Development Corporation's application.

- g. Mr. Lee is pleased to provide an update on the progress of the Small Business Mini Grant series. As mentioned previously, the press conference held on May 1st was successful in generating awareness. Subsequently, the small business mini grant application process was opened on May 15th.
- h. To reach out to potential applicants, three outreach sessions have been conducted. One session took place on May 18th at the Mill Creek Library community room, another is currently ongoing at the Hirt Auditorium, and a virtual informational session is scheduled for Monday, May 22, 2023, at 10:00 AM.
- i. All relevant information about these sessions is available on our website, and Mr. Lee encourages commissioners to review and share this information with their constituents. Suggesting, if anyone has social media pages, it would be beneficial to tag and post the information there as well, ensuring maximum outreach.
- j. So far, approximately ten applications have been received, which is an encouraging start. However, the aim is to receive many more applications throughout the mini grant process.

The Small Business Mini Grant series is progressing well, thanks to the successful press conference and the ongoing outreach efforts. The Commission is dedicated to supporting small businesses, and the response received thus far indicates positive engagement from the community.

Commissioner White requested an update from Mr. Gary Lee regarding the educational aspect of Diverse Erie's mission. She mentioned her recollection of our past engagement with the education committee and expressed her curiosity about any recent advancements or improvements in that area.

Mr. Lee did inform Commissioner White that the topic in question is not currently under discussion. The matter will be addressed by the upcoming Grants Review Committee at a later time. It should be noted that the specific team/committee related to educational component of the commission's mission has been disbanded in connection with the existing committee.

Commissioner White also asked Mr. Lee about any news regarding the funds mentioned at the Diverse Erie and County Council meeting on April 12th? Have the funds been located?

Mr. Lee explained that he reached out to Councilman Andre Horton and Councilwoman Mary Rennie, as directed, and submitted an invoice requesting the funds. However, the Financial Director for the County Executive's office responded, stating that the money is not available. In response, they deferred to Attorney Wachter to discuss the legal options with Attorney Tom Talarico regarding pursuing the funds.

Attorney Tim Wachter added that he has made a formal request to obtain the official stance of the council regarding this specific issue, but they have refused to provide it to me through the county. It appears that there may not be a unanimous agreement among council members regarding the appropriate position on this matter.

5. Website Development and Branding:

- a. Mr. Lee said that the Commission has been actively engaging in weekly meetings with the Parker Phillips Team to discuss the strategic plan and branding process. The focus has primarily been on website development and social media outreach, both of which play crucial roles in promoting the Small Business Mini Grants initiative.
- b. To aid in the promotion and advertising efforts, the Parker Philips team has prepared a toolkit. This toolkit has been shared with the Commissioners, and Mr. Lee encourages them to utilize the provided information on their respective social media platforms to help spread the word about the initiative.
- c. Recognizing the importance of maintaining effective communication, it is emphasized that maintaining contact with County Council representatives and leveraging personal networks and influence is crucial.
- d. By leveraging the toolkit and maintaining communication channels, the Commission aims to maximize the reach and impact of the Small Business Mini Grants initiative, ensuring that it reaches as many eligible businesses as possible.

Mr. Lee said that the board training session conducted by Strategy Solutions Inc. on Saturday, May 6, several important topics were covered. These included board governance, Robert's Rules of Order, policies and procedures, mission, and goals, as well as insights on state ethics provided by Attorney Tim Wachter, the training session was highly valuable and took place at an opportune time.

- a. To ensure accessibility and continued learning, the entire session was recorded via Zoom. This recording will be made available to all participants, allowing them to review the content and benefit from the training even if they were unable to attend or stay for the full duration of the session.
- b. Furthermore, it has been recommended to provide a pledge to code of conduct and a confirmation form for those who may not have been able to attend or stay for the entire session. The solicitor and his team are currently preparing the necessary form, which will be sent out to participants soon.
- c. These measures demonstrate a commitment to providing comprehensive training resources and ensuring that all board members have access to the valuable information covered during the session.

Mr. Lee expressed his gratitude to all the commissioners for the significant amount of time and effort they have dedicated to this endeavor, particularly over the past 60 days. He is optimistic about the path we have taken and believes that we have turned a corner. The feedback we have received from community leaders and individuals has been positive, and they are enthusiastic about working with us on the Mini Grants Initiative. Let us ensure that we execute this initiative effectively as we continue to make progress.

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

5. Reports of Commission Officers

- (a) Chairperson-No Report
- (b) Vice-Chairperson-No Report
- (c) Secretary-No Report
- (d) Treasurer-Not Present-No Report

8. Reports of Committee Chairpersons

(a) **Finance Committee-**

- i Chief Administrative Officer Gary Lee has provided a comprehensive and detailed briefing on the finances, ensuring that the commissioners are well-informed about the status and developments in that area. This briefing aims to provide transparency and clarity regarding the financial aspects of the organization's operations.

(b) **Executive Committee**

- i Chairman Ricardo "Rocky" Escajadillo expressed his gratitude to Strategy Solutions and Deborah Thompson for a highly impactful training session that generated valuable thoughts and ideas. He said that the training, particularly on Robert's Rules of Order, shed light on procedural governance and emphasized accountability and adherence to the organization's bylaws.
- ii Recognizing the importance of strong governance, Chairman Escajadillo emphasized the need to establish a governance committee. This committee would play a vital role in aligning the organization and ensuring smooth progress, despite the additional meetings it may require.
- iii The establishment of a governance committee demonstrates a commitment to effective decision-making, transparency, and accountability. Proactively addressing governance matters contributes to a well-structured and efficient operational framework for the organization.

Chairman Escajadillo's appreciation for the training session and emphasis on the governance committee underscore the significance of these initiatives in promoting sound governance practices and supporting the organization's overall effectiveness.

Chairman Ricardo "Rocky" Escajadillo stated that he has designated Chief Administrative Officer Mr. Gary Lee as the primary point of contact for media inquiries. He said that Mr. Lee will handle media interviews and respond to inquiries promptly and appropriately, ensuring a focused and streamlined approach to media communications. As the Chair of the Commission, Chairman Escajadillo will personally oversee all board interviews or appoint a representative to communicate with the media. This approach aims to improve the clarity and conciseness of the Commission's messaging, ensuring that information shared accurately represents the organization's perspectives and goals. By assigning specific individuals for media interactions and taking personal responsibility for board interviews, the Commission demonstrates its commitment to effective communication. This proactive approach underscores the importance of clear and concise communication in representing the Commission and its objectives to the public and media outlets. Furthermore, maintaining effective communication with council members is emphasized to ensure productive relationships and updates on the Commission's progress. Upholding the pledge of code of conduct and confirming commitment to education and training are vital for accountability within the team. These actions will form the foundation for success and open doors to exciting opportunities and positive changes. Dr. Escajadillo recognized that the

diverse expertise within the team is seen as a source of strength, and by working together, the Commission aims to grow stronger and make a greater impact.

(c) **Grants Committee**

I Vice Chairman Jonathan Atkinson reported that the Grants Review Committee held two meetings this month to interview six candidates for the second round of Generational Impact Grants. This action was taken in response to requests made by the Chief Administrative Officer and the Chairman of the Grants Review Commission. The committee is currently working on preparing recommendations to present to the full board. To ensure timely decision-making, the Grants Review Committee intends to request a special meeting before June 1st to share these recommendations with the Commission and proceed with voting on the selected grant applicants.

9. Unfinished Business-No Unfinished Business

10. New Business

The recommendations for the recipients of the second round of Generational Impact Grants will be delayed and addressed in our upcoming meeting. We will ensure that this matter receives the necessary attention and is thoroughly discussed during that session.

Commissioner Tiffany LaVette sought clarification regarding the inquiry concerning the process of accounting for any potential conflicts of interest.

Attorney Tim Wachter explained to Commissioner LaVette, that regarding the voting process, if there were a conflict, she would need to abstain from participating in the deliberations and refrain from voting. Additionally, she would need to submit a conflict memo, for which he said that he can provide a draft, to the Commission. Copies of this memo would then need to be forwarded to the County Executive and the County Council following the vote. It is important to note that our usual practice is to provide these copies along with the approved minutes at the subsequent meeting, rather than beforehand.

11. Adjournment

A motion was made by Tiffany L. LaVette and seconded by Paul Kokhanevich to adjourn the meeting at 6:26PM. All commissioners present voted in favor.

Attendees: Art Leopold, Curtis Jones, Jr., and AJ Rao