

ERIE COUNTY DIVERSE ERIE COMMISSION

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, October 19, 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/82534505816?pwd=bWMzSDV2eIMzVHpSMkVxYWQ5Z1VrQT09>

Meeting ID: 825 3450 5816

Passcode: 809261

Attendees: Dr. Sarah E. Carter; Gwendolyn White; Brandy Cortes; Jonathan Atkinson; Saeedullah Taraky; Paul Kokhanevich; Gary N. Lee; Timothy Wachter

1. **Call to Order/Roll Call 6:00PM**
 - (a) Tiffany LaVette -Not Present
 - (b) Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo-Not Present
 - (c) Marie "Mia" Wells -Not Present

2. **Approval of the Agenda**

A Motion was made by Gwendolyn White and seconded by Dr. Sarah E. Carter, to approve the September 21, 2023, agenda as presented. All commissioners present voted in favor, none opposed.

3. **Approval of the September 21, 2023, Meeting Minutes**

A Motion was made by Paul Kokhanevich, and seconded by Gwendolyn White and Saeedullah Taraky, to approve the September 21, 2023, agenda as presented. All commissioners present voted in favor, none opposed.

4. **Hearing of the Public 6:11PM**

Art Leopold:

Mr. Leopold expressed gratitude to the entire board, acting chair, and the Chief Administrative Officer. He mentioned a few important topics:

- (a) In the spring and summer, discussions took place with Erie County Council regarding a \$3.5 million invoice submitted last year. Questions about its validity were raised by the council, and Mr. Leopold is eager to understand how they plan to process these funds, which have been placed in reserve.
- (b) With the new county budget approaching, Mr. Leopold is interested in the organization's stance on seeking additional funding for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives. He wants to convey this information when engaging with and addressing the County Council members.
- (c) As a member of the Racial Justice Policy Initiative, Mr. Leopold said that he anticipates a meeting with Mr. Gary Lee, to discuss issues related to promoting Disadvantaged Business Enterprises (DBE).

5. **Presentations:** None
6. **Report on Chief Administrative Officer:**

Operational Matters:

Personnel:

- a. No issue for discussion

Budget:

- a. The Finance Committee has received the following documents:
 - i. The September 2023 financial reports, which include an updated budget review comparing the budget to actual expenses.
 - ii. The banking statement and expense files with supporting documents.
- b. Mr. Lee said that the current projected budget is in excellent financial shape, and we are operating within the expected financial parameters set by the Commission. He continued, saying that Diverse Erie has also submitted the budget request for the period of July 1st, 2024, through December 31st, 2026, to Erie County Council during their budget meeting on Wednesday, October 10th, 2023. Each Commissioner should have received a copy of the budget letter. The meeting with County Council was highly productive, and it was one of the most positive interactions that Mr. Lee had with them in his nine years of involvement, both in his previous role as Director of Administration and in his current position as Chief Administrative Officer for Diverse Erie Commission.
- c. During the meeting, Mr. Lee provided an update on the key activities at the Commission and discussed the budget in detail. County Council had several questions and concerns, including how we plan to leverage the initial investment of \$3.5 million. Mr. Lee also shared feedback from meetings with key leaders in the county and presented the findings of the 3i Networking report provided on current grant funding opportunities. Emphasizing the challenges of finding grants, particularly since we are primarily a grant-making organization.
- d. County Council expressed their satisfaction with the Commission's progress in recent months and commended Mr. Lee's leadership in aligning the Commission's focus in the right direction. Mr. Lee also reported on the board training session conducted in May 2023, which received positive feedback. Additionally, County Council was pleased with the April meeting between the Commission and the County Council in their chambers, which served as a reset for our collaboration.
- e. Councilman Andre Horton plans to submit an action sheet for Commission funding in the 2024 budget since the County Executive Office did not include Diverse Erie in the initial budget submission. This is the standard procedure, and if a majority of the council members vote in favor, we will receive funding. Councilman Horton has expressed his intent to support our funding request.
- f. Diverse Erie Commission is actively reaching out to grant awardees, encouraging them to attend County Council meetings in November and share

the value of the Diverse Erie Commission and how the grants have impacted their businesses or organizations. Mr. Lee encouraged the Commissioners to personally invite these awardees to participate.

Media and Presentations: No Report

Grants Development:

- a. Mr. Lee provided an update on the Generational Impact Grants round one reimbursement process. Diverse Erie Commission informed GMA Development Group, LLC, and the Greater Erie Economic Development Corporation (GEEDC) that their contract agreements had expired on September 12, 2023. GMA has requested an extension, and the Grants Review Committee is reviewing their request. Legal issues are still pending with the Greater Area Economic Development Corporation's reimbursement request, and our attorney, Andy Schmidt, is overseeing the litigation, with Quinn Law overseeing the matter. Attorney Schmidt provided a detailed status report on this legal case during the October 12th Executive Committee meeting, and the case is currently pending legal action.

Website Development and Branding:

- a. Mr. Lee said that he maintains regular weekly meetings with the Parker Philips team to discuss the strategic plan and branding efforts, including the website and social media outreach. He encourages all commission board members to invite their associates, family members, and friends to visit the Diverse Erie website and join us on social media platforms for the most up-to-date information. It is crucial that we continue to share the updated talking points with your council representatives and their network, particularly as we approach November and the budget discussions.
- b. Mr. Lee attended the Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership Homecoming event on October 4th and 5th. The event saw a strong turnout, and Mr. Lee said that, Commissioner White did an excellent job moderating a panel discussion on African American Women in Leadership Shattered Ceilings: Race and Gender in Erie.

Mr. Lee added, while representing the Commission, He had the privilege of attending the 118th Manufacturer and Business Association event, which took place on October 11th at the Bayfront Convention Center. The event was a highly positive gathering featuring American Hero Ambassador "Sully" Sullenberger as the keynote speaker. Some of you may recall his remarkable achievement of safely landing an airplane on the Hudson River in January 2009.

Mr. Lee then read a letter received from the Northeast Chapter of the American Association of Airport Executives (NEC AAEE) that included a donation check in the amount of \$250.00 to Diverse Erie, hoping it can further support our goals.

Mr. Lee concluded his report by stating that he is committed to actively seeking opportunities to cultivate professional relationships and communicate the vision and mission of the Commission,

which is of utmost importance. As he often emphasizes in these meetings, our approach is not to make excuses but to make necessary adjustments. Mr. Lee said that the Commission remains dedicated to pursuing excellence, and he extended his gratitude to each of the Commissioners, for their time, energy, and unwavering support.

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

8. Reports of Committee Chairpersons

a. **Executive Committee-** No Report

b. **Finance Committee-** No Report

c. **Grants Review Committee**

- i. Vice-Chairman Atkinson said that there are recent developments involving a prior recipient of the Generational Impact Grant, GMA Development Group. Their grant has expired, and they have requested the board to consider granting an 8-month extension along with a change in the project's scope. The project, originally focused on a building remodel, is now proposed to be about building acquisition. Mr. Lee has asked that the GMA Group submit their revised proposal by October 27th. Once the revised proposal is submitted, the Grants Review Committee will assess it and potentially present it for a vote before the full board.

9. Unfinished Business- No unfinished business

10. New Business-No New Business

11. Adjournment

A motion was made by Saeedullah Taraky and seconded by Paul Kokhanevich to adjourn the meeting at 6:25PM. All commissioners present voted in favor.

Invitees: Art Leopold (Diverse Erie Supporter), and AJ Rao (Erie Times News-GoErie.com)