

ERIE COUNTY DIVERSE ERIE COMMISSION

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, December 21, 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: Brandy Cortes; Marie “Mia” Wells; Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo; Tiffany L. LaVette; Jonathan Atkinson; Saeedullah Taraky; Paul Kokhanevich; Gary N. Lee; Attorney Patricia Kennedy

1. Call to Order/Roll Call 6:00PM

Attorney Patricia Kennedy conducted a rollcall to establish a quorum calling the meeting to order.

Establish a Quorum		
	PRESENT	NOT PRESENT
Tiffany LaVette	X	
Dr. Sarah E. Carter		X
Gwendolyn White		X
Brandy Cortes	X	
Jonathan Atkinson	X	
Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo	X	
Marie “Mia” Wells	X	
Saeedullah Taraky	X	
Paul Kokhanevich	X	

2. Approval of the December 21, 2023, Agenda

A Motion was made by Saeedullah Taraky and seconded by Tiffany LaVette to approve the December 21, 2023; meeting agenda as presented.

Attorney Patricia Kennedy conducted a rollcall vote to approve the December 21, 2023; meeting agenda as presented.

Gwendolyn White was not present. Dr. Sarah E. Carter did attend the meeting at the very end via Zoom.

Approval the January 18, 2024, Meeting Agenda		
	YEA	NAY
Tiffany LaVette	X	
Brandy Cortes	X	
Jonathan Atkinson	X	
Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo	X	
Marie "Mia" Wells	X	
Saeedullah Taraky	X	
Paul Kokhanevich	X	

3. Hearing of the Public 6:10PM

Art Leopold:

Mr. Leopold warmly greeted the members of the Commission as he reintroduced himself to the group. Expressing his gratitude, he conveyed his intention to address the Commission that evening and thanked the Commissioners and Chief Administrative Officer, Mr. Lee, for providing the opportunity.

Mr. Leopold informed the group that he had recently spoken to the Erie County Council during their budget approval, specifically regarding the lack of funding for the DEI Commission. While acknowledging that he gently but firmly criticized their decision, he expressed hope for potential funding in the upcoming year. He mentioned that the County Council was reallocating AARP funds, allocating \$2,000,000 for EMS services, though he expressed uncertainty about the connection between EMS services and AARP funds. Despite this, he remained optimistic that the Council's decisions would be more favorable for the Commission's funding.

In addition, Mr. Leopold took a moment to honor the commissioners who would be concluding their terms at the end of the year, recognizing the challenging nature of their work, and expressing gratitude for their commitment to the important responsibilities they undertook.

Finally, Mr. Leopold informed the group about a Kwanzaa celebration scheduled for Thursday, December 28th, at 5:30 at the EF Smith Quality of Life Learning Center, hosted by the NAACP. Wishing everyone happy holidays and the best for 2024, he concluded his address.

Camille Crenshaw:

Camille Crenshaw, expressing her gratitude, mentioned that she had spoken during the last meeting regarding the funding agreement extension, but that she was unwell at the time. Now that she was feeling better, she wanted to address the board once again in person. As a representative of GMA Development Group, she extended her thanks to

everyone on the board for dedicating time to reviewing and discussing the matter. Camille reiterated the significance of securing funding for GMA Development, emphasizing its potential to assist community members who, under different circumstances, might face challenges accessing the training the group is poised to offer.

She underscored the idea that not everyone can or should pursue a college education, drawing from her personal experience of obtaining a degree that she currently does not utilize. Reflecting on her own academic path, Camille shared that if she had been presented with an option requiring less effort and expense but offering a more lucrative outcome than her current situation, she might have chosen that alternative. She continued by explaining that GMA Development Group aims to provide such opportunities for individuals in the community who may not have the prospect of attending college but still aspire to achieve the quintessential American dream of homeownership with a white picket fence.

Donald Crenshaw:

Mr. Crenshaw addressed the group, expressing his gratitude to the entire commission for their commendable efforts in securing and consolidating funding for the community. He emphasized the training program's significance, highlighting its operation in a dedicated facility to provide essential training opportunities for individuals who, as mentioned by Camille, might otherwise miss out on such chances.

Over the past year, Mr. Crenshaw noted the collaboration with several entities, including CareerLink, ECAT, WEST Bayfront, and the Sisters of Saint Joseph, among others. GMA is actively partnering with various organizations dedicated to affordable housing and homeownership initiatives. He underscored the key objective of empowering individuals with practical skills, guiding them from a pre-apprenticeship program with GMA to a full apprenticeship. Starting at \$20.00 per hour, along with benefits, this journey progresses towards achieving journeyman status, ultimately enabling individuals to afford a house under homeownership. Mr. Crenshaw depicted it as a structured stepping ladder, beginning with a pre-apprenticeship and advancing through apprenticeship, employment, and, finally, the realization of the dream of homeownership.

He acknowledged that, regardless of GMA Development's initiatives, challenges will persist without equipping the next generation and individuals to continuously advance. Mr. Crenshaw extended his gratitude to everyone involved, expressing optimism for the final approval that would allow GMA Development Group to extend and progress further. He thanked the Commission in advance for their time and dedication.

4. Approval of the November 16, 2023, Meeting Minutes

A Motion was made by Marie "Mia" Wells and seconded by Paul Kokhanevich to approve the November 16, 2023; meeting minutes as presented.

Attorney Patricia Kennedy conducted rollcall vote to approve the November 16, 2023, meeting minutes as presented.

Approve the November 16, 2023, Meeting Minutes			
	YEA	NAY	OBSTAIN

Tiffany LaVette	X		
Brandy Cortes	X		
Jonathan Atkinson	X		
Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo	X		
Marie "Mia" Wells	X		
Saeedullah Taraky	X		
Paul Kokhanevich	X		

5. Presentations: None

6. Report on Chief Administrative Officer:

Operational Matters:

- a. To commence, Mr. Lee said that he would like to express his gratitude to the entire commission for their dedication and efforts in promoting funding for our community.

Personnel:

- a. The Commission personnel's annual goals and performance reviews have been successfully completed this month.

Budget:

- a. Mr. Lee shared that the Finance Committee meticulously reviewed various items, including the November 2023 financial reports, the updated budget overview, banking statement, and expense file with supporting documents. He said that he had had the opportunity to discuss the upcoming 2023 Commission audit report with Mr. Rick Clayton, a CPA and partner at Mahoney, Reed, and Scarpetti. Together, Mr. Lee and Mr. Clayton thoroughly examined the key initiatives and programs implemented during 2023, and Mr. Clayton assured Mr. Lee that, based on the Commission's policies and procedures, the audit review should proceed smoothly. The audit review is scheduled to commence in January 2024 and is anticipated to conclude within three to four months. The current overall projected budget indicates that we are operating within the financial parameters expected by the Commission, projecting stability through July 1st, 2024.
- b. In January 2024, Mr. Lee said that he will engage with Erie County Council members to discuss the Commission's initial request in the 2024 budget, amounting to \$3.5 million. With the presence of two new council members, it becomes crucial to address any inquiries they may have regarding the vision and mission of the Commission.

Media and Presentation:

- a. Mr. Lee said that there are no current concerns or questions.

Grants Development:

- a. Mr. Lee continued with an update on the Generational Impact Grants Round One reimbursement process was provided. GMA Development Group has submitted a letter

seeking an extension of the expiration date, and Chairman Atkinson will report the committee's feedback at the proper time.

Website Development and Branding:

- a. Ongoing collaboration with Parker Phillips on the strategic plan and branding process, including the website and social media outreach, is progressing. Commissioner Saheed Taraky will be providing feedback in the new year to enhance our social media outlets. I strongly encourage everyone to invite businesses and family members to join our website and participate in our social media platform, as this outreach is pivotal.

Other Noteworthy Updates include:

- a. Mr. Lee's attendance at the inaugural event of the Afghan Community Center on December 3rd, under Commissioner Taraky's leadership. Commendations to Commissioner Taraky and his team for a successful event.
- b. Additionally, on December 14th, I engaged in a productive meeting with the Erie Racial Justice Policy Initiative (ERJPI) to discuss potential changes to systems perpetuating racial injustices.
- c. Mr. Lee said that he also spoke with Ms. Selena King, the Northwest Regional representative for the office of US Senator John Fetterman, exploring potential grant opportunities with the federal government. While federal opportunities usually require program operation history, we discussed private sector possibilities with companies like Amazon and Google contributing to DEI efforts. Ms. King has agreed to collaborate as we explore private funding options. He intends to circle back with County Council to revisit their commitment to funding.

In closing, Mr. Lee expressed his gratitude for each Commissioner's dedication, passion, and support for the vision and mission of the Commission. We have achieved much this year, and he said that he is eagerly anticipating accomplishing even more in 2024.

A Motion was made by Jonathan Atkinson and seconded by Marie "Mia" Wells to approve the report of the Chief Administrative Officer. All commissioners present voted in favor.

Attorney Patricia Kennedy conducted rollcall vote to approve the report of the Chief Administrative Officer.

Roll Call Vote to Approve the Report of the Chief Administrative Officer.		
	YEA	NAY
Tiffany LaVette	X	
Brandy Cortes	X	
Jonathan Atkinson	X	
Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo	X	
Marie "Mia" Wells	X	
Saeedullah Taraky	X	

Paul Kokhanevich	X	
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7. Reports of Committee Chairpersons

a. **Executive Committee-**

- i. The Executive Committee convened last week to conduct the 2023 goals and performance review of the chief administrative officer. Overall, Mr. Lee has demonstrated exceptional performance, and the committee expresses gratitude for his leadership and commitment to advancing the Commission's mission throughout the year. Although the year started with some challenges, significant positive contributions were made to the community as the year progressed, and we are steadfastly moving in the right direction. Dr. Escajadillo, addressing Mr. Lee directly, conveyed appreciation for his informative and guiding role as the Chairperson.
- ii. Dr. Escajadillo extended congratulations to Commissioner Saeed Taraky for successfully inaugurating the first Afghan Community Center not only in Erie County but also in the entire Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. This achievement contributes to bringing diversity, equity, and inclusion to the area. Dr. Escajadillo praised Mr. Taraky as an advocate and a valuable source of knowledge and resources for the Commission, expressing deep appreciation for his contributions.
- iii. Emphasizing the importance of continued support, Dr. Escajadillo urged the Commission to encourage county council representatives to invest the planned \$3.5 million in the calendar year 2024. He explained that this funding is crucial for the mission's progress, and he highlighted the need to provide regular updates to council representatives on key activities and developments within the Commission. Stressing the significance of monthly conversations, he emphasized the importance of remaining vigilant and identifying various community activities and events for potential sponsorship, aligning with the Commission's mission and message. Dr. Escajadillo expressed extreme satisfaction with the Commission's progress in the past year and looks forward to continued success in 2024.

b. **Finance Committee-**

- i. Marie "Mia" Wells reported that the financial status of Diverse Erie is proceeding as expected. Everything is progressing smoothly, acknowledging that it remains an ongoing work in progress.

c. **Grants Review Committee-**

- i. Vice-Chairman Jonathan Atkinson reported that the Diverse Erie Grants Review Committee recently met with Mr. Donald Crenshaw and his family to discuss his request for an extension of the Generational Impact Grant initially awarded to GMA Development Group. They also addressed a request for a change in the project's scope. During the meeting, the Grants Review Committee sought clarification on the purpose behind the proposed change, specifically focusing on building acquisition. Inquiries were made regarding Mr. Crenshaw's intent for sole ownership of the property where

- the project would take place and the potential timeline for completion, should the extension request be approved.
- ii. After the discussion with Mr. Crenshaw, Vice-Chairman Atkinson shared that the Grants Review Committee, in consultation with the solicitor and the Chief Administrative Officer, collectively determined that approving a grant for the purpose of building acquisition would not be in the best interest of the Commission and taxpayers. Consequently, the committee recommended maintaining the original project as the central focus of the award, believing it would ultimately lead to generational impact.
 - iii. Furthermore, the Grants Review Committee suggested that a three-month extension, instead of the initially requested six months, would be more suitable. This decision allows the Commission to explore alternative approaches to utilizing the funding in case GMA Development Group is unable to complete the project within the designated timeframe. The committee sees this as a fair and reasonable compromise that has the potential to facilitate project completion while safeguarding the current funding allocated to the Commission.

A conversation ensued when, while expressing continued curiosity, Commissioner Brandy Cortes inquired of Mr. Donald Crenshaw about the reasons behind the inability to complete the project within the contracted timeframe.

In response, Donald Crenshaw explained that, in his role as the managing member, the initial emphasis was placed on the 12-month period rather than specific dates. They anticipated moving forward within that timeframe. However, a significant challenge arose as the project commenced over a year ago. To secure access to capital, they borrowed over \$1,000,000, covering the initial investment. However, the bank-imposed restrictions, indicating that further funding would only be accessible once renovations began, generating additional revenues. Consequently, they found themselves constrained until more funds were available. This situation presented a two-part challenge: obtaining full access to additional borrowing and dealing with the initial borrowing of \$1,000,000. To address this, they borrowed an additional \$250,000 focusing specifically on the building. Over time, as they continued building equity and generating revenues through the completion of training, renovation, and house sales, they reached a point where they could access the second tier of funding. Unfortunately, during the six-month period, they faced uncertainty about funding availability, leading to oversight regarding the specific date. They initially overlooked the fact that the 12-month period would conclude, and when the funding became available, they assumed they had a full year without considering the deadline. This oversight resulted in missing the six-month access-to-funding date.

Commissioner Cortes continued by asking Mr. Crenshaw to please clarify what you mean by not taking dates into consideration.

Mr. Crenshaw explained that, the discrepancy lies in distinguishing the specific contract end date from the 12-month duration. He said that they assumed that the funds would be accessible within the first six months, even though they were approved, but practical access remained elusive during that period.

Commissioner Tiffany LaVette, chimed in to say that she thinks that it is important to acknowledge that the initial distractions and timing issues were influenced by the public scrutiny and challenges we faced as a Commission. She said that she wants to ensure that the GMA Group does not face

any repercussions due to these factors. Commissioner LaVette said that, however, it is crucial to recognize that our distractions played a role in this situation.

Commissioner Paul Kokhanovich posed another question to Mr. Donald Crenshaw, stating, "What was the reason behind the delay?"

Mr. Crenshaw answered saying that the reason for the delay was the uncertainty stemming from having just borrowed \$1,000,000. The bank indicated they were hesitant to approve an additional \$250,000, and it was unclear whether it would be granted. So, not only was there a question about getting the money reimbursed, but also the plan for initially acquiring the funds. When the bank initially denied approval for the \$250,000, the plan was contingent on demonstrating the success of the program. It was not a straightforward approval; rather, the bank required evidence that the program was effective. As we progressed with renovating and selling houses, establishing a positive track record, the bank became more amenable. However, as we approached the 12-month deadline, they indicated that focusing on the bank at that point might have been possible, but the cumulative effect of the earlier months, coupled with the need to establish a track record of success, contributed to the overall delay. It was a combination of factors.

8. Unfinished Business- No unfinished business

9. New Business-

- a. Chairman Ricardo Escajadillo announced a revised meeting schedule for Diverse Erie extending through December 2024, aligning with the principle of "less is more." Starting in January, the regular meetings will transition to a bi-monthly format, taking place every other month on the third Thursday. This pattern will continue through November 2024. Meanwhile, the Executive Committee meetings will persist on the second Thursday of each month. The Grant Reviews Committee gatherings will be conducted on an as-needed basis, with attendees advised to check the hearing website for current listings. The Finance Committee meetings will maintain their regularity on the second Wednesday of each month at 6:00 PM. However, the Board meetings at the headquarters will adopt an every-other-month schedule.

A Motion was made by Tiffany L. LaVette and seconded by Marie "Mia" Wells to approve a revised meeting schedule for Diverse Erie extending through December 2024. All commissioners present voted in favor.

Attorney Patricia Kennedy conducted rollcall vote to approve a revised meeting schedule for Diverse Erie extending through December 2024.

Roll Call Vote a revised meeting schedule for Diverse Erie extending through December 2024.

Roll Call Vote to approve a revised meeting schedule for Diverse Erie extending through December 2024.		
	YEA	NAY
Tiffany LaVette	X	
Brandy Cortes	X	
Jonathan Atkinson	X	

Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo	X	
Marie "Mia" Wells	X	
Saeedullah Taraky	X	
Paul Kokhanevich	X	

- b. The annual cost-of-living increase for the Diversity Commission staff. After careful review and discussion, it has been determined that aligning with Erie County's approach and maintaining the annual cost-of-living increase at a minimum of 3% is the most appropriate course of action for the upcoming year, 2024.

A Motion was made by Tiffany L. LaVette and seconded by Saeedullah Taraky to approve the annual cost-of-living increase at a minimum of 3% for the upcoming year, 2024. All commissioners present voted in favor.

Attorney Patricia Kennedy conducted rollcall vote to the annual cost-of-living increase at a minimum of 3% for the upcoming year 2024.

Roll Call Vote to approve the annual cost-of-living increase at a minimum of 3% for the upcoming year, 2024.		
	YEA	NAY
Tiffany LaVette	X	
Brandy Cortes	X	
Jonathan Atkinson	X	
Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo	X	
Marie "Mia" Wells	X	
Saeedullah Taraky	X	
Paul Kokhanevich	X	

Prior to ongoing discussions among our colleagues, Mr. Atkinson acknowledged the presence of mixed sentiments regarding the upcoming vote. He emphasized the need to remind the Commission that the current vote does not pertain to agreeing or disagreeing with the project's purpose, which has already undergone thorough deliberation and approval. The focus now is on voting regarding the logistical aspect of whether an extension is warranted given the circumstances.

Vice Chairman Jonathan Atkinson urged the Commission to consider a precedent where flexibility was demonstrated in offering opportunities for application revisions. He stressed the importance of maintaining consistency in our approach, cautioning that showing flexibility towards one ethnic

group while adopting a restrictive stance in the present situation could undermine the overall purpose of the Commission.

Vice Chairman Atkinson expressed his belief that such a discrepancy could harm the Commission's public trust and expose it to deserved scrutiny resulting from the vote. With that a motion was made.

A Motion was made by Tiffany L. LaVette and seconded by Saeedullah Taraky to amend the funding agreement between Erie County Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Commission and GMA Development Group, LLC for the Generational Impact Grant. Parties desire to extend the term until March 31, 2024.

Attorney Patricia Kennedy conducted rollcall vote to approve the motion to amend the funding agreement between Erie County Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Commission and GMA Development Group, LLC for the Generational Impact Grant. Parties desire to extend the term until March 31, 2024.

Roll Call Vote to approve the motion to amend the funding agreement between Erie County Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Commission and GMA Development Group, LLC for the Generational Impact Grant. Parties desire to extend the term until March 31, 2024.		
	YEA	NAY
Tiffany LaVette	X	
Brandy Cortes		X
Jonathan Atkinson	X	
Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo		X
Marie "Mia" Wells		X
Saeedullah Taraky		
Paul Kokhanevich	X	X

The conversation involved a discussion about a grant funding decision. Commissioner Tiffany L. LaVette passionately expressed disappointment and questioned the purpose of not passing the grant's funding agreement extension request and the use of grant funding. Paul Kokhanevich explained that he voted no due to a lack of information and understanding of the Grant Review Committee's decision. Tiffany L. LaVette expressed concerns about potential legal issues, suggesting a re-vote or a special meeting to reconsider the decision. Attorney Patricia Kennedy clarified the procedural aspects, indicating that for the current agenda, the grant contract extension requests failed, and any reconsideration would need to be scheduled for the next meeting.

The conversation delved into specific issues related to the contract, timeline, and extension for a construction project. Mr. Donald Crenshaw, the grant applicant, highlighted challenges faced during the project, including delays and extensions. Commissioner Brandy Cortes raised concerns about accountability to taxpayer money and the importance of following the contract terms. Mr. Gary Lee emphasized the importance of contextualizing the situation, acknowledging a delay in the board turnover that is widely known. He highlighted the comprehensive efforts of the Grants Review Committee. This committee meticulously examined Mr. Crenshaw's proposal, involving discussions, and addressing questions following the presentation by Mr. Crenshaw and his team. Mr. Lee commended Vice Chairman Jonathan Atkinson for accurately presenting the information, expressing his belief that the entire board possessed sufficient information for an informed decision tonight. He assured the group of the availability of additional information if needed, emphasizing his confidence in the factual nature of the presented information. Mr. Lee elaborated on the commission's consistent practice of presenting matters to the board before voting, acknowledging the unique nature of this issue—an extension request. Despite this difference, he underscored the standard procedure of seeking clarification from the full board through the Grants Review Committee before voting. Mr. Lee recognized the distinctiveness of the extension situation but conveyed his willingness to abide by the board's decision, asserting confidence in the presented facts. The discussion continued with a proposal to reconsider the vote during the next scheduled meeting and a suggestion to gather more information during a potential work session.

Ultimately, the decision to adjourn was made.

Adjournment

A motion was made by Tiffany L. LaVette and seconded by Marie “Mia” Wells to adjourn the meeting at 7:00PM. All commissioners present voted in favor.

Invitees: Art Leopold (Diverse Erie Supporter), Lisa Thompson-Sayers (Erie Times News-GoErie.com), Donald Crenshaw (Owner-GMA Development Group), Camille Crenshaw, (Administrative Assistant-GMA Development Group), Aaron Crenshaw (Assistant Project Manager-GMA Development Group), Sarah Shinsky (AVP/Office Manager Northwest Bank)