

ERIE COUNTY DIVERSE ERIE COMMISSION

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, November 16, 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; Dr. Sarah E. Carter (joined the meeting after rollcall) Gary N. Lee; Patricia Kennedy

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

Attorney Patricia Kennedy conducted rollcall to establish a quorum calling the meeting to order. Gwendolyn White was not present.

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

2. Approval of the November 16, 2023, Agenda

A Motion was made by Marie “Mia” Wells and seconded by Saeedullah Taraky to approve the November 16, 2023; meeting agenda as presented.

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

Gwendolyn White was not present.

Approval the November 16, 2023; 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 6:11PM

Mr. Leopold expressed gratitude to the respected members of the commission, acknowledging the Chief Administrative Officer and the team's Solicitor. He took a moment during this evening's opportunity to inform the group that he had discussions with the County Council during a budget meeting on Tuesday, November 14, 2023. According to him, one Council member is expected to submit a funding request for the DEI Commission through an action sheet. While Mr. Leopold could not speak on behalf of that Council member, he conveyed his understanding that he suggested to the Council, through public comments, to view the funding request favorably and approve it if it comes forward on the action sheet.

Hoping for a positive outcome, Mr. Leopold mentioned that the budget approval is anticipated at the end of the month, with one or two additional public meetings for comments. He recommended that commission members seize the opportunity to speak in support of DEI before the Council and encourage others in their networks to do the same. Emphasizing the importance of this chance to influence the Council, Mr. Leopold noted the presence of Mr. Rock Copeland, an elected council member, in the audience. While Mr. Copeland will officially join the council in the coming year, he was present to hear the conversation and gain an understanding.

Mr. Leopold urged the Diverse Erie Commission to speak up during this critical time, expressing his belief that there may still be available funds that could be allocated. He is committed to continue working on behalf of the commission to convince the Erie County Council to allocate additional funding. Acknowledging the upcoming changes in the council composition, Mr. Leopold highlighted the potential for securing additional funds in the budget approval process or in the coming year.

4. Approval of the October 19, 2023, Meeting Minutes

A Motion was made by Saeedullah Taraky and seconded by Paul Kokhanevich to approve the October 19, 2023; meeting minutes as presented.

Attorney Patricia Kennedy conducted rollcall vote to approve the October 19, 2023, meeting minutes as presented.

Approve the October 19, 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:

Personnel:

- a. Mr. Lee stated that the office staff's annual evaluations are scheduled to take place in December.

Budget:

- a. Mr. Lee stated that the Finance Committee convened to examine the October 2023 financial report, which included updates on the budget versus actual figures, an overview of the revised budget, and the banking statement. The expense file and supporting documents were scrutinized, revealing that the legal services item remained over budget at \$80,000, surpassing the allocated \$40,000. The financial statements, prepared by our accountants and covering the period ending September 30th, 2023, were submitted to both the Finance Committee and the County Council for their assessment.
- b. Mr. Lee added that currently, the overall budget is in a healthy financial state, and we are operating within the parameters expected by the Commission. Looking ahead, the projected budget from July 1st, 2024, to December 31st, 2026, has garnered continued support from Councilman Andre Horton, who advocates for the Commission's financial investment.
- c. To further support our initiatives, 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. Derived from the investment dollars, as outlined in a letter sent to them.

Media and Presentations:

- a. Mr. Lee conveyed that he believes the Erie Times News is currently in the process of preparing a report or a historical account. This piece will not only cover the budget but also highlight the positive investments made in the community, and he expressed gratitude for their efforts.
- b. On October 28th, 2023, Mrs. Shaddai Rodriguez, the owner of Photos by Dai, and Mr. Lee had the opportunity to appear on the Insider show hosted by Mrs. Lisa Adams. The timing

was perfect, allowing them to provide the county and the region with an update on our Diverse Erie initiatives and our future plans. The segment went very smoothly and was well-received.

Grants Development:

- a. Regarding the update on the first-round reimbursement process for the Generational Impact Grant, Mr. Lee shared insights into the recent legal proceedings involving the Greater Area Economic Development Corporation (GEEDC). During the event from November 6th to the 9th, Mr. Lee found himself in court defending the Commission's decision not to grant GEEDC the full funding award of \$250,000.
- b. This legal battle stemmed from GEEDC taking Diverse Erie Commission to court, alleging a breach of contract dating back to January 2023. Their primary claim was that we were withholding the \$250,000 without valid reasons. However, the commission had sought crucial information from GEEDC on two occasions. Firstly, we requested details of the parties responsible for the renovation, demolition, and rebuild aspects of the project. Secondly, we insisted on receiving a copy of the subcontract agreement to understand the project contributors and their agreements. Lastly, we sought documentation outlining GEEDC's investment in the project.
- c. Mr. Lee added that, to our disappointment, it was discovered that GEEDC had failed to invest their share of the funding in the project, despite it being a dollar-for-dollar match reimbursement grant. Their initial budget was \$500,000, later revised to \$546,000, and they were required to invest at least \$500,000 to be eligible for reimbursement. Their submitted budget included items such as kitchen renovations, HVAC, lighting, elevator system repairs, carpentry, and flooring. Notably, they invoiced the Commission for \$254,800 for carpet installation, a legitimate capital improvement expense. However, since they could not provide proof of their investment, we could not approve the full amount.
- d. Mr. Lee said that efforts to settle the matter out of court were made, with the Commission offering \$125,000.00, which aligned with the \$127,427.20 GEEDC eventually received from the jury's decision. The jury correctly determined that the damage entitled was essentially the cost of the carpet, amounting to \$127,427.20. Mr. Lee explained that while it is regrettable that legal action was necessary, the Commission, backed by the Executive Committee, stood firm on the principle of not releasing taxpayer dollars without proper documentation. Despite the audit concerns, our primary focus remains ensuring the responsible use of taxpayer funds. The case is now concluded, and we will release the funds to GEEDC, hoping to move forward positively while upholding our commitment to fiscal responsibility.
- e. Mr. Lee informed the team that the GMA Development Group has formally requested an extension for their specific project, which, along with GEEDC's project, had an expiration date of September 12th, 2023. The Grants Review Committee is currently in the process of scrutinizing this extension request and has sought additional information from GMA, encompassing several specific items. Mr. Lee concluded this section of his report, stating that, it is important to note that the Grants Review Committee is actively assessing the request, and its final outcome will determine whether it proceeds to the full board for further action and that Vice Chairman Atkinson is expected to provide further details.

Website Development and Branding:

- a. Diverse Erie consistently holds weekly meetings with Kate Philips and the Parker Phillips team to discuss the strategic plan and brand development process regarding our website and social media presence. Mr. Lee reiterated his previous emphasis, encouraging everyone to prompt their friends, family, and colleagues to visit our website and follow us on

- social media. He emphasized that this is the most effective means of staying updated on the latest information and Commission activities. Mr. Lee strongly recommended reaching out to our respective council member, particularly considering some will be new members. While our chairman will address appointments and terms later in the meeting, Mr. Lee suggested proactively connecting with our current council representative and initiating discussions with the new member to foster engagement and communication.
- b. On October 26th, Mr. Lee had the honor of being the featured speaker at a management training session for Northwest Bank. During the session, he had the opportunity to discuss the vision and mission of the Commission. The attendees expressed genuine enthusiasm upon learning about the existence of a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Commission in Erie County. It was a valuable reminder that we should not assume everyone is familiar with our organization. This was particularly rewarding for Mr. Lee because the audience comprised a completely new group for him. Meeting approximately 25 individuals for the first time made the experience even more positive. Overall, it was a highly constructive and engaging meeting.
 - c. On November 1st, Mr. Lee attended the celebration of the 15th anniversary of the Jefferson Educational Society's service to the Erie community, held in collaboration with Gannon University as part of the Global Summit Speaker Series. The featured speaker for the event was Miss Della Clark, the President of the Enterprise Center in Philadelphia, who discussed the promotion of racial and economic equity. During her visit, Mr. Lee had the privilege of engaging in a one-on-one meeting with Miss Clark. He took the opportunity to share information about the vision and mission of the Diverse Erie Commission and sought feedback based on her experiences in Philadelphia. Mr. Lee described Miss Clark as an extraordinary individual with significant accomplishments. Since 1992, she has been instrumental in bringing her vision to life as the President of The Enterprise Center, a leading organization in the Greater Philadelphia region's entrepreneurial ecosystem. The center is dedicated to cultivating and investing in minority entrepreneurs to foster economic growth in communities. According to Mr. Lee, Miss Clark is widely recognized in Philadelphia for her impactful work. The Enterprise Center, as a 501c(3) organization, focuses on investing in people and projects to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to build wealth for themselves, their families, and their communities. Their mission revolves around inspiring collaboration for economic growth, with a particular focus on the Mid-Atlantic region, operating offices in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Mr. Lee highlighted Miss Clark's success in securing funding for her organization, noting her nationwide efforts. Miss Clark extended an invitation for him to visit whenever he is in Philadelphia, expressing a desire to sit down and discuss their shared goals. Mr. Lee affirmed his commitment to staying in touch, emphasizing that Miss Clark is someone the Diverse Erie Commission will continue to connect with.
 - d. On November 15, 2023, Mr. Lee participated in the annual meeting for AHN Saint Vincent Health Systems, describing the experience as highly noteworthy. During the event, Dr. Christopher Clark, the President of Saint Vincent Hospital, provided a comprehensive update on the significant advancements and initiatives taking place on their campus. Notably, the organization has invested over \$250,000 in recent years, and they are planning an additional investment of \$30 million.
 - e. Mr. Lee expressed his appreciation for the remarkable healthcare landscape in the County of Erie, emphasizing the county's fortune in having three top-tier health providers despite its relatively modest population of around 270,000 residents. He underscored the outstanding

leadership within the region's healthcare sector and noted the commendable work being undertaken by AHN Saint Vincent Health Systems. Overall, he found it gratifying to learn about the substantial contributions and progress made by this particular organization.

- f. From December 1st to the 3rd, Mr. Lee plans to attend The Pennsylvania Society, an annual weekend retreat for Pennsylvania's political and business leaders taking place on November 30 and December 1-2, 2023, in New York City. This event serves as a gathering for key stakeholders, featuring prominent figures from the state, including U.S. senators, the governor, and top corporate leaders. It provides an excellent opportunity to establish connections with new individuals and engage with those Mr. Lee already knows from Harrisburg. During these interactions, he intends to provide updates on the Commission's activities, discuss potential funding opportunities, and further nurture existing relationships. Mr. Lee commits to sharing a detailed report on his experiences at the next meeting upon his return.
- g. Emphasizing the significance of professional relationships, Mr. Lee recognizes that relationships serve as the new capital. He underscores the importance of actively participating in conversations, seeking feedback, and ensuring ongoing engagement with stakeholders to enhance the Commission's impact. In expressing gratitude, Mr. Lee extends thanks to everyone for their time and continued support of the Commission. Reflecting on the year, he notes that despite its challenges, the year is concluding on a positive note, leaving him excited and grateful as Thanksgiving approaches.

A Motion was made by Saeedullah Taraky and seconded by Jonathan Atkinson 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	
Dr. Sarah E. Carter	X	
Brandy Cortes	X	
Jonathan Atkinson	X	
Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo	X	
Marie "Mia" Wells	X	
Saeedullah Taraky	X	
Paul Kokhanevich	X	

7. Reports of Committee Chairpersons

a. Executive Committee-

- i. Dr. Ricardo "Rocky" Escajadillo aimed to build upon the Chief Administrative Officer's earlier points during the meeting. The focus was on securing support from County Council representatives to allocate the proposed \$3.5 million for the upcoming 2024 budget.

Emphasizing the potential positive impact on the Commission and Erie County, Dr. Escajadillo stressed the importance of updating county representatives on Commission activities. He urged members to be mindful of their appointed terms and maintain thorough communication with Council representatives.

- ii. Dr. Escajadillo also highlighted the need to promote Commission activities, seeking ways to disseminate information and keep the board informed.
- iii. Dr. Escajadillo commended the successful Fiesta in Perry Square Park for Hispanic Heritage Month, expressing gratitude to Commissioner Cortes for her involvement.
- iv. He suggested the possibility of changing the frequency of Diverse Erie Board meetings to bi-monthly starting in January 2024, while committee meetings would remain monthly.
- v. Dr. Escajadillo recognized the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday, reflecting on November as a time for gratitude. He expressed appreciation for the Commission's mission and acknowledged the Chief Administrative Officer's handling of the litigation case involving GEEDC and Diverse Erie. Dr. Escajadillo thanked Mr. Lee for representing the Commission, considering it a significant win and responsible use of taxpayer dollars.

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 November 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.

8. Unfinished Business- No unfinished business

9. New Business-No New Business

10. 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)