

# ERIE COUNTY DIVERSE ERIE COMMISSION

## *Meeting Minutes*

Thursday, May 16, 2024

Diverse Erie Headquarters

1128 State Street, Suite 300, Erie, PA 16501 at 6:00 P.M.

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/85319488506?pwd=MIFEZ3IraU5jQ05BbjYyM3VzbjVWZz09>

Meeting ID: 853 1948 8506

Passcode: 847117

**Attendees:** Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo; Jonathan Atkinson; Marie "Mia" Wells; Brandy Cortes; Tiffany L. LaVette; Dr. Sarah E. Carter; Saeedullah Taraky; Paul Kokhanevich; Ejay Fyke; Gary N. Lee; Attorney Tim Wachter

**1. Call to Order/Roll Call** 6:00P.M.- Marie "Mia" Wells and Dr. Sarah E. Carter-Were Not Present

### **2. Approval of the May 16, 2024, Agenda**

A Motion was made by Ejay Fyke and seconded by Paul Kokhanevich to approve the March 16, 2024; meeting agenda as presented. All commissioners present voted in favor. None were opposed.

### **3. Hearing of the Public:**

Mr. Leopold expressed gratitude to the commission for the chance to address them. He reported having engaged in discussions with both individual members and the County Council as a whole, noting their efforts to expedite the release of approved funding. Additionally, he highlighted a slight discrepancy between the desires of the administration and the approved actions, expressing hope for a fruitful resolution. He emphasized the importance of these endeavors for the community and commended the commission for their ongoing positive work. He concluded by extending well wishes for the future and expressing anticipation for forthcoming opportunities.

### **4. Approval of the March 21, 2024, Meeting Minutes**

A Motion was made by Saeedullah Taraky and seconded by Ejay Fyke to approve the March 21, 2024; meeting minutes as presented.

### **5. Presentations**

1. Troy Bingham began his address by providing background on his upbringing in South Africa and his extensive experience in sports, particularly in fostering diversity. He emphasized his commitment to leveraging sports to instigate positive cultural change within Erie's BIPOC community. Bingham then outlined the shared vision of diversity at the Erie's Sports Center, emphasizing its role in engaging and enriching the youth through various sports programs. He highlighted the significant benefits of youth sports, including improved physical health, mental well-being, academic performance, and social skills.

Furthermore, Mr. Bingham detailed the efforts of the Erie Sports Center in delivering programs directly to low-income communities, citing successful initiatives such as free soccer clinics and the expansion of sports offerings over the years. He shared success stories of individuals whose lives were transformed through sports programs, showcasing the tangible impact of their efforts. Mr. Bingham also highlighted national and local partnerships that contribute to the Erie Sports Center's mission.

Moving forward, Bingham proposed strategies for further community engagement, including the expansion of sports leagues, professional development opportunities, and educational sessions for parents. He outlined plans for growth, including increasing scholarships and acquiring necessary resources like vehicles and equipment. Bingham concluded by reiterating his belief in the transformative power of sports and expressing gratitude for the opportunity to share his vision.

Chairman Ricardo Escajadillo expressed appreciation for Bingham's insights and echoed the sentiment of sports as a catalyst for positive change. He acknowledged the transformative potential of sports in shaping individuals' lives and looked forward to the future impact of Bingham's initiatives.

2. Kate Philips shared updates on Mary's vacation, noting it as her first since joining the team, expressing happiness for her. Julia Ferritto, who is responsible for some social media at Parker Philips, remained present. To boost engagement, Kate compiled a social media guide, tailored to effectively connect with Diverse Erie audiences, highlighting the organic growth of their social media presence. Emphasizing the importance of community involvement, Kate encouraged active participation, including following the page, sharing personal endorsements, and integrating Diverse Erie into LinkedIn profiles.

Kate discussed the significance of hashtags and tags in expanding reach and visibility, urging consistent interaction with the community through comments and posts. Authenticity was stressed as essential in engaging with followers. Kate further encouraged sharing personal experiences to enrich conversations. She outlined protocols for managing inappropriate content while promoting respectful dialogue and diverse perspectives.

Acknowledging the importance of each member's contribution, Kate emphasized the need for consistency and authenticity in engaging with followers. She encouraged sharing content and fostering meaningful interactions to support the commission's goals of diversity and inclusion.

During the Grant Review Committee meeting, Commissioner Taraky emphasized the need to enhance the DEI Commission's social media presence by highlighting the success stories of mini grants. He suggested using engaging formats like Instagram reels to better communicate these outcomes. Mr. Lee recommended sharing more about the grants to increase applications, and Commissioner Taraky noted that featuring commissioners' activities would also be beneficial. Despite previous discussions, these success stories have not been prominently showcased, and Commissioner Taraky offered to help create content.

Kate agreed on the need for a clear process to implement these ideas, noting that her staff's role is communication, not grant monitoring. She supported focusing on detailed stories rather than daily posts and endorsed sponsoring posts to increase engagement, while cautioning about potential criticism over expenses.

Vice Chairman Jonathan Atkinson suggested collaborating with supported nonprofit groups for mutual benefit through cross-sharing activities. Kate responded positively, explaining the importance of engaging mini grant recipients and encouraging them to share their achievements. She emphasized that fostering a sense of community among recipients is crucial for demonstrating the impact of their funding.

## **6. Report on Chief Administrative Officer:**

### **Personnel:**

- a. None to discuss.

### **Budget:**

- a. Mr. Lee began his report by stating that the budget for Diverse Erie has been reviewed by the Finance Committee. He provided details on the following items: the April 2024 financial reports, including the budget versus actual updated budget overview, the banking statement, the expense file, and supporting documents. Additionally, the financial statement for the three months ending March 31, 2024, was completed and reviewed by the Finance Committee. Overall, the current budget is in good condition, and operations are within the parameters set by the Commission.
- b. On April 16, 2024, Mr. Lee requested that our solicitor, Attorney Tim Wachter, submit a letter to Attorney Tom Talarico regarding the submission of the \$1.5 million invoice to the Finance Department, which has not yet been acted upon. In the letter, Attorney Wachter asked for the steps to be implemented by Erie County Council to enforce the appropriation and

release of the \$1.5 million funds to the Commission. Attorney Talarico stated that he would discuss the inquiry with Erie County Council, and we are currently awaiting a response.

- c. On May 30, the team will begin the audit review with Mr. Clayton and his team for the 2023 commission audit report. The audit will be conducted by the firm Maloney, Scarpitti and Company, and we look forward to working with them on this audit.

### **Media and Presentations:**

- a. Regarding media engagements and presentations during March and April, Mr. Lee reported that he participated in several interviews to promote small business initiatives, discuss various grant opportunities, and provide updates on the Commission's activities.

Mr. Lee appeared on TALK Radio, local radio stations 103.0FM, 105.9FM, and 1530AM, and on 814 Super Soul Saturday on WERG Gannon University's local FM 90.5. He also appeared live on Channel 12's Live at 4, Channel 24 News Maker segment, and "Chatting with Sonya and Friends." The feedback received on these media initiatives was very positive.

### **Grants Development:**

Mr. Lee gave an update on the Small Business Mini Grant stating that:

- a. The response to the Small Business Mini Grant initiative was excellent. He thanked all the Commissioners for helping to spread the word. He said that we received a total of 75 applications, with requests amounting to approximately \$1.6 million.

Mr. Lee gave a breakdown of the evaluation process mentioning:

- i. Devan did an outstanding job managing the checklist, ensuring that the businesses had at least 51% BIPOC ownership and were established before June 10, 2021, and she also organized the various applications and documentation received.
- ii. Mr. Lee stated that he conducted evaluations focusing on the key areas supported by the commission: housing, childcare, transportation, and healthcare. Additionally, he reviewed the sales levels, business tax returns, number of employees, and longevity of the businesses.

Of the 75 applications received:

- i. Two were not BIPOC-owned.
- ii. Nine were from companies that had previously received grants, and the Grants Review Committee decided not to award funds to businesses that had received prior funding in the last round.
- iii. Fifteen were denied due to tax-related issues or failure to submit requested information.
- iv. Twenty-four were startups.

The Grants Review Committee has recommended funding 25 companies for a total of \$291,500. He reminded the commissioners that they received a copy of this report yesterday.

Mr. Lee said that the process was very thorough and successful, and he announced that a press conference will be held the following day May 17th, 2024, where elected officials and small business owners will participate in the ceremony.

### **Website Development and Branding:**

- a. Regarding website development, Mr. Lee strongly encouraged the commissioners to keep their county representatives informed and engaged. This is particularly important as we progress through the summer.

**Other Noteworthy Updates include:**

- a. On April 5th, Mr. Lee attended the HerPower Gala, an event dedicated to honoring key community leaders for their commitment to regional improvement. Commissioner Tiffany Lavette hosted the event, demonstrating exceptional leadership.
- b. On May 2nd, Mr. Lee participated in the New Pittsburgh Courier Fab 40 event, which celebrated young emerging African American leaders for their contributions to the western region of the state. This occasion provided an opportunity to network with various leaders, including Pittsburgh Mayor Ed Gainey and Mr. Evan Frazier, President and CEO of the Advanced Leadership Institute. Mr. Frazier, who focuses on BIPOC leadership development, will be collaborating with Mr. Lee on future initiatives.
- c. On May 9th, Mr. Lee said that he attended Law Day, a well-organized event featuring Doris Kearns Goodwin, a renowned presidential historian, biographer, former sports journalist, and political commentator. Her presentation was outstanding.
- d. On May 22nd and 23rd, Mr. Lee plans to attend the 3rd Annual Black Legislative Caucus Foundation in Harrisburg. He will meet with key stakeholders to discuss challenges and opportunities in housing, education, small business development, and healthcare initiatives for Black and Brown communities in Pennsylvania.
- e. During the week of June 10th, Mr Lee will travel to Philadelphia to visit the Enterprise Center, where he will meet with President Della Clark and her team. This visit will provide an excellent opportunity to observe their operations and discuss key initiatives.
- f. Additionally, Mr. Lee highlighted that this month is Mental Health Month. It is crucial to prioritize self-care for our mental, physical, and spiritual well-being. We should live in the moment, express gratitude, and value our relationships with family, friends, and the community.
- g. Furthermore, Mr. Lee said that wanted to acknowledge the exceptional work of the various Commissioners. Commissioner LaVette did a fantastic job with the HerPower Gala. He also congratulated Commissioner Taraky, who was recently featured in the Erie Times-News and had the opportunity to network at the governor's mansion. This exposure is a great opportunity to highlight the work and leadership of Commissioner Taraky in his community.

Lastly, Mr. Lee said that he appreciates the dedication and expertise of all the Commissioners and all the committee. He stated that their contributions are invaluable to the mission of the Commission.

A Motion was made by Vice Chairman Jonthan Atkinson and seconded by Commissioner Tiffany L. LaVette to approve the report of the Chief Administrative Officer. All commissioners present voted in favor.

## **7. Reports of Committee Chairpersons**

### **Executive Committee-**

- i. Chairman Ricardo Escajadillo began his report by expressing gratitude for the Commission's ongoing work. He gave special acknowledgments to Commissioner Tiffany LaVette for the HerPower event, noting the remarkable energy and success of the event. He also congratulated Commissioner Taraky on his feature in the Erie Times News and his commendable efforts at the governor's mansion.

- ii. Chairman Escajadillo extended praise to Commissioner Cortes for her leadership with the Hispanic Leadership Association and her involvement in announcing the Fiesta on the Square, scheduled for September 14th. He emphasized the importance of documenting these activities on social media and encouraged commissioners to contact their council representatives regarding the release of \$1.5 million, which is crucial for future initiatives.
- iii. He also commended Devan and Mr. Lee for their work in promoting and organizing small business mini grants, highlighting the extensive effort involved in evaluating numerous applications. Additionally, he recognized the Grant Review Committee for their dedication and thorough review of 75 applications.
- iv. Chairman Escajadillo mentioned the upcoming press conference, encouraging attendance, although he noted he would be unable to attend. He reflected on the excellent presentations that inspired him to actively contribute to promoting health and wellness within the community. He plans to collaborate with Commissioner Taraky on marketing efforts and urged all commissioners to stay engaged with community events and activities.
- v. Finally, he underscored the importance of mental health, describing it as foundational to overall well-being and encouraging the Commission to continue promoting a positive mindset and mission-driven purpose.

#### **Finance Committee-**

Commission Treasurer Marie "Mia" Wells was not present at the meeting-**No Report.**

#### **Grants Review Committee-**

- i. Vice Chairman Jonathan Atkinson commenced his report by thanking the chair and reiterating Mr. Lee's comments regarding the Grants Review Committee meeting on April 29th. During this meeting, the committee reviewed and preliminarily approved or recommended potential awardees, totaling 25 grants amounting to \$291,500. He noted that a vote on these recommendations will take place in the near future. The list of awardees or recommendations was emailed yesterday, and he hoped everyone had the opportunity to review it. He extended his gratitude to Mr. Lee for his evaluation of the applicants, Devon for significant vetting efforts, and the Grants Review Committee members Mr. Taraky, Ms. LaVette, and the new member Ejay for their strong contributions.
- ii. Atkinson then mentioned upcoming BIPOC-centric activities, including an art show called "Open Eyes" for kids and young adolescents at the Bayfront Convention Center on Saturday, which is a free event. He encouraged everyone to share and celebrate diversity through artwork. He also highlighted the approaching summer activities such as Rib Fest, Juneteenth celebrations, and heritage festivals. He advocated for the DEI Commission to have a presence at these events and volunteered to manage a table to promote the Commission's brand and visibility within the community.
- iii. In conclusion, Atkinson thanked everyone for the opportunity to speak and provided his updates.

**Diverse Erie Secretary Brandy Cortes** began her report by saying, "Thank you, everyone. I don't have much to add, but I want to echo what has been said, especially regarding mental health awareness. This is an ongoing issue that requires daily self-care practices. Our BIPOC community is particularly at risk due to generational trauma and other factors. Statistically, we see higher rates of mental health challenges and suicide among our youth and BIPOC populations.

Therefore, she said that she fully supports the need to reach out, invest in our youth and community, and be actively involved in special events. Reminding us all that it is crucial to have a presence on the ground, helping

people connect with services such as substance use treatment, mental health care, and prevention programs. We must recognize and address these risks, ensuring we are out there making a difference."

Commissioner LaVette suggested that the commission participate in the upcoming Juneteenth celebration. She inquired if there had been any discussions about this and proposed reaching out to Erie's Black Wall Street to explore opportunities for representation, such as having an informational booth.

Mr. Gary Lee responded, affirming that we would reach out to the organizers, particularly mentioning Erie's Black Wall Street. He emphasized the need for the organizations they invest in, such as Erie's Black Wall Street, to actively promote events where they could share commission information.

However, Mr. Lee expressed a preference for a more interactive approach rather than setting up a booth. He highlighted the importance of commissioners mingling with attendees to engage in conversations directly, rather than standing behind a table. He mentioned his positive experiences from engaging directly with the community during his tenure with the county.

Mr. Lee agreed with Vice Chair Atkinson about the importance of attending various festivals and events to increase visibility and interaction with the public. He committed to reaching out to Erie's Black Wall Street to gather information on their plans and any potential activities that the commission could participate in and share these details with the entire commission.

## **8. Unfinished Business-None**

### **9. New Business:**

A motion was made by Vice Chairman Jonathan Atkinson and seconded by Saeedullah Taraky and Ejay Fyke, to approve the 25 recommended applications to award for the 2024 Small Business Mini Grants Initiative. All commissioners present voted in favor.

### **10. Adjournment**

A motion was made by Saeedullah Taraky and seconded by Tiffany L. LaVette to adjourn the meeting at 7:13PM. All commissioners present voted in favor.

Invitees: Art Leopold (Erie County Resident and Diverse Erie Supporter), Troy Bingham (Erie's Sports Center), Kate Philips and Julia Ferrito (Parker/Philips)