

# ERIE COUNTY DIVERSE ERIE COMMISSION

## Meeting Minutes

Thursday, November 21, 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; 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 6:04P.M.- Paul Kokhanevich- Was Not Present

2. Approval of the November 21, 2024, Agenda

A Motion was made by Vice Chairman Jonathan Atkinson and seconded by Commission Secretary Brandy Cortes to approve the September 19, 2024; meeting agenda as presented. All commissioners present voted in favor. None were opposed.

Please note that the November 21, 2024, agenda still had Commissioner Wells listed as a Commission Treasurer. Her information was deleted from the agenda.

3. Hearing of the Public: None

4. Approval of the September 19, 2024, Meeting Minutes

A Motion was made by Commission Secretary Brandy Cortes and seconded by Commission Treasurer Ejay Fyke to approve the September 19, 2024; meeting minutes as presented.

5. Presentations:

Nicole Parker of Parker Strategy Group, LLC presented Nicole Parker begins her presentation by expressing gratitude for the opportunity and providing an update on the progress of the economic impact study. The study, still in draft form, focuses on the effects of investments made by Diverse Erie on both the Pennsylvania and Erie County economies, including operational spending, Generational Impact Grants, Small Business Mini Grants, and the Diverse Erie Small Business Loan Program. Parker anticipates positive results, emphasizing the importance of showcasing how these investments have helped small businesses thrive and build wealth in Erie County.

She discusses the methodology of the study, noting a literature review on the vital role small businesses play in the economy. Despite their limited job creation, each job is significant to the community. Parker also touches on measuring the return on investment (ROI), explaining that, while ROI may not always be immediately large, it is crucial to demonstrate the value of these investments.

Parker assures the group that the report will be completed by the December 13th deadline, and she encourages team members to review the data and ask questions to ensure comfort with the findings. She also mentions the second phase of the project, which involves interviews and photography of local businesses to complement the data with real stories.

The design team at Parker Strategy Group is creating a visually appealing report with infographics and concise one-pagers to ensure the key findings are easily accessible. Parker highlights the positive impact of the investments, with \$3.5 million invested resulting in a \$5.7 million impact.

Saeed Taraky suggests translating the materials into multiple languages to ensure accessibility for the diverse community, including Spanish, Nepali, and Arabic speakers. Parker agrees to explore cost-effective translation options, and Brandy Cortes shares a tool that can translate documents into over fifty languages. Parker is interested in using this tool and thanks the team for their support. Taraky offers to help identify the specific languages needed and connect with translators in the community.

Parker commits to translating key materials, focusing on the executive summary and infographics, and ensuring they are designed for a broad audience. The presentation concludes with gratitude for the collaboration and agreement on next steps.

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

**Personnel:** The annual performance reviews for staff members will be conducted in December 2024.

#### **Budget:**

- a. Mr. Lee reported that the Finance Committee conducted a detailed review of financial items in September and October 2024. These items included financial reports (budget versus actuals), an updated budget overview, banking statements, expense filings, and supporting documentation.
- b. The financial statements for the nine months ending September 30, 2024, were prepared by Buseck, Barger, Bleil & Co., Inc. Mr. Lee noted that the current budget is in sound financial condition, and operations are within the parameters set by the Commission.
- c. On October 22, 2024, Mr. Lee attended and presented at the County Council's 2025 budget meeting, requesting a \$1.5 million investment for the Commission. This funding is intended to support initiatives in healthcare, homeownership, education, and apprenticeship programs.
- d. Mr. Lee also attended the County Council's public budget hearing to reiterate the request. He highlighted that the approved \$1.5 million allocation from January 2024 has not yet been released. This matter remains between the County Executive and County Council.
- e. Mr. Lee, along with Chairman Dr. Rocky, has been in communication with Chairman Scutella of Erie County Council, who assured them that efforts to release the funds will continue during the current budget session.

Commissioner Saeed Taraky inquired if there was anything the Commission or its members could do to assist. Mr. Lee encouraged Commissioners to reach out to their County Council representatives to discuss the matter and offer support to expedite the process.

Mr. Lee provided an update on office space, noting that the Chamber will relocate to the Intermodal building on Erie's Bayfront, owned by the Erie Metropolitan Transit Authority, beginning January 2025.

The Commission currently rents space from the Erie Regional Chamber Growth Partnership at \$1,000 per month. However, due to the Chamber's staff reductions, they no longer require the full space. Mr. Lee plans to discuss future plans with Mr. Pete Zaphiris the owner of the Great Lakes Insurance Building to determine if the Commission can continue using the current space or if a new tenant requires the entire floor, the Commission will explore other options, including potentially relocating with the Chamber. Further updates will be provided as the situation develops.

Media and Presentations: None currently

Grants Development:

- a. Mr. Lee noted that additional investment funding from the County is critical for advancing Part 2 of the Commission's plan, which includes initiatives in homeownership, apprenticeship, education, and healthcare.
- b. The Executive Committee recently reviewed an in-home childcare rehabilitation project proposed by the County Executive. The project involves a \$500,000 investment to support small businesses operating in the daycare sector in Erie County.
- c. Each eligible business could receive up to \$24,999 for facility improvements, with awards to be distributed by October 31, 2026. Qualified childcare providers will be identified by the Early Learning Resource Center (ELRC).
- d. While the project received a general overview, detailed information is pending. The Commission has invested \$115,000 in eight daycare providers through the Small Business Initiative, which has shown significant success.
- e. Mr. Lee explained that the Commission's remaining \$400,000 in funds has already been obligated. As such, the Commission cannot invest in the proposed project until additional funding, including the \$1.5 million approved in January 2024, is released.
- f. The Commission shared this position with the County Executive, emphasizing its willingness to revisit the project if funding becomes available.

Commissioner Tiffany LaVette raised concerns about the proposed in-home childcare project, citing legal restrictions limiting family daycare providers to three unrelated children, which limits its potential impact on addressing the county's childcare shortage. With over 1,000 children on the county's childcare waitlist, the Commission prefers to focus on larger-scale solutions, such as renovating larger facilities to accommodate more children.

Commissioner LaVette reported ongoing collaboration with the County Council and experts to develop sustainable childcare initiatives, supported by a \$2.5 million allocation for workforce development and facility renovations, managed by the gaming authority. The Commission is committed to addressing childcare needs across urban and rural areas.

Mr. Lee praised the County Council's efforts in advancing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives and emphasized the importance of city-county collaboration to strengthen the region. He affirmed that the Commission will continue evaluating the in-home childcare project and prioritize the release of approved funds to address the county's childcare and workforce development goals effectively.

Website Development and Branding:

- a. Mr. Lee reported on the status of website development and branding, stating that as of October 31, 2024, the Commission has concluded its contract with the Kate and Company team. Moving forward, Ms. Devan Mitchell will manage postings across all social media platforms. Commissioners are encouraged to share relevant information and materials with Ms. Mitchell for consideration in social media updates.
- b. Mr. Lee noted that upon securing additional funding, the Commission intends to explore hiring a public relations consultant on an hourly basis, which would be a more cost-effective approach for the Commission's resources.
- c. Mr. Lee referenced Ms. Nicole Parker's recent presentation on the impact study, expressing enthusiasm for the valuable insights it provides. He emphasized the importance of disseminating this information to highlight the outcomes of the Commission's investments and to outline future plans effectively.

Mr. Lee also encouraged Commissioners to maintain regular communication with their County Council representatives, keeping them informed about the Commission's activities and soliciting their input to foster continued collaboration.

Other Noteworthy Updates include:

Mr. Lee reported attending the National Black NBA Conference in Washington, DC, highlighting discussions on executive leadership and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives. He emphasized the need for accountability in corporate DEI financial commitments, noting that only a fraction of the pledged \$50 billion has been spent.

He also attended the Hispanic Heritage Celebration hosted by the FDA Medical Center, commending Dr. Rocky, and Commissioner Cortes for their inspiring contributions. Mr. Lee shared his intention to incorporate personal storytelling into his public speaking.

Looking ahead, Mr. Lee announced plans to attend the Pennsylvania Society event in December 2024, an opportunity to network with influential leaders and celebrate the achievements of honoree Thomas B. Hagen.

As Thanksgiving approaches, Mr. Lee expressed gratitude for the Commissioners' dedication, recognizing their contributions to the Commission's positive impact and reputation. He encouraged adaptability and concluded by reaffirming appreciation for the team's commitment to the Commission's mission.

Treasurer Ejay Fyke inquired about the status of hiring a grant writer. CAO Gary Lee explained that the decision has been placed on hold pending confirmation of \$1.5 million in funding, emphasizing the need to avoid unbudgeted expenses. Treasurer Fyke disagreed on the value of attending the Pennsylvania Society trip if the grant writer funding is on hold.

Mr. Lee clarified that the trip, costing approximately \$2,500, is already budgeted as part of the Commission's travel expenses and is essential for building relationships with the new Senate and national leadership. He emphasized that fostering these connections is a key responsibility of his role and critical for the Commission's long-term growth. Secretary Brandy Cortes requested and received confirmation of the trip's estimated cost.

A Motion was made by Commissioner Saeedullah Taraky and seconded by Commission Secretary Brandy Cortes to approve the report of the Chief Administrative Officer. All commissioners present voted in favor.

## 7. Reports of Committee Chairpersons

### Executive Committee-

i.

### Finance Committee-

- i. Commission Treasurer Ejay Fyke reported that the financial status remains unchanged from the previous month. He reiterated concerns about current expenditure discussed earlier and noted ongoing efforts to engage with Council members to secure the release of funds. No further updates were provided.

### Grants Review Committee-

- ii. No updates

Commission Secretary Brandy Cortes shared feedback from the community, highlighting concerns of fear and anxiety, particularly among children and families in the Hispanic community. To address this, she is collaborating with the Mayor's Advisory Council, Catholic Charities, and the Multicultural Community Resource Center to develop a supportive network. She said that she continues to volunteer her time to:

- Engaging therapists and crisis response teams for immediate support.
- Partnering with local organizations to provide proactive, non-political assistance.
- Participating in a Diversity Roundtable to identify further resources.

Secretary Cortes emphasized the need for unity and support, noting her personal commitment to volunteering time and resources. The initiative seeks to address the needs of all community members, particularly vulnerable families, and children.

**8. Unfinished Business: None**

**9. New Business:**

- i. The Commission discussed uncertainties regarding funding and its impact on the 2025 meeting schedule. Secretary Brandy Cortes suggested switching to monthly meetings to address potential funding issues and prepare for operational challenges. CAO Gary Lee stated that confirmation of \$1.5 million in funding is expected by year-end and highlighted the flexibility to adjust the meeting schedule if needed.

A motion was made by Commission Saeedullah Taraky and seconded by Vice Chairman Jonathan Atkinson and Commissioner Saeedullah Taraky, to approve the Annual cost-of-living increase for staff. All commissioners present voted in favor.

- ii. Chairman Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo proposed maintaining the 2024 bi-monthly meeting schedule for 2025, with provisions for emergency meetings, as necessary. The Executive and Finance Committees will continue meeting monthly. The proposal was motioned, seconded, and unanimously approved. The discussion centered on the 2025 annual cost of living increase for staff, set at a minimum of 3% as per the CAO's contract, with a range of 3% to 6%. The increase, effective in January, also applies to the administrative assistant. After clarifying details, the motion was approved unanimously.

A motion was made by Commission Saeedullah Taraky and seconded by Vice Chairman Jonathan Atkinson and Commissioner Saeedullah Taraky, to approve the Annual cost-of-living increase for staff. All commissioners present voted in favor.

**10. Adjournment**

A motion was made by Commissioner Tiffany L. LaVette and seconded by Commission Saeedullah Taraky to adjourn the meeting at 6:59 P.M. All commissioners present voted in favor.

Invitees: Elizabeth Vasquez, Business Service Specialist Erie County Economic Development (ECED) Department