

ERIE COUNTY DIVERSE ERIE COMMISSION

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, September 19, 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; Tiffany LaVette-Were Not Present

2. Approval of the September 19, 2024, Agenda

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

3. Hearing of the Public:

Mr. Art Leopold expressed gratitude for the opportunity to speak and outlined his involvement with the Erie Racial Justice Policy Initiative, a group focused on policy organization for the past three years. He highlighted recent presentations at local events, including the Erie Economic Conference and the Jefferson Educational Society, and emphasized the group's goals.

Leopold acknowledged the contributions of Mr. Gary Lee, a community partner with statewide expertise, and sought support for Curtis Jones, Jr., who is taking over leadership of the group's initiatives. He referenced research by Dr. Ken Louie, which suggests that full participation from minority and women-owned businesses could generate \$765 million in additional revenue for the city, representing nearly 9% of its GDP. This would benefit both minority communities and the broader city.

Leopold clarified the need to enforce laws ensuring that contracts and funds are directed to certified DBE and WBE organizations, and to tap into underutilized state, regional, and local funding streams. He emphasized that Erie has historically missed out on these opportunities and that securing these resources could significantly boost the community.

Mr. Gary Lee, with his extensive background in minority business development, offered his expertise to support these efforts, stressing the importance of increasing certifications for minority- and women-owned businesses. Leopold concluded by requesting support to help Curtis Jones, Jr. implement these policies effectively, bringing economic growth to the community.

Commission Secretary Brandy Cortes acknowledged that she may have missed part of the discussion but expressed gratitude to Mr. Leopold for his ongoing advocacy for the minority community. She expressed interest in being involved in the conversation with Mr. Lee and Mr. Jones, particularly to support Hispanic and Latino businesses, which face significant barriers. She emphasized her willingness to help the entire community and noted that access to funding would be crucial. She requested to learn more about the initiatives being discussed.

Mr. Gary Lee responded affirmatively, stating that he would include Commissioner Cortes in the discussion after speaking with Mr. Jones to determine the next steps.

Commission Treasurer Ejay Fyke sought clarification, summarizing that one goal is to certify minority-owned businesses in Erie County so they can qualify for available funding. Mr. Art Leopold confirmed that certification is one aspect of the broader effort, which also includes building processes within the city and county for awarding contracts and working with certified vendors. He explained that certified businesses could partner with larger contractors or fulfill minority subcontractor requirements, emphasizing the need for Curtis Jones, Jr. to collaborate with local governments and businesses.

Mr. Leopold concluded that successful implementation would benefit not only minority and women-owned businesses but also the broader community. Treasurer Fyke expressed interest in further discussions to explore how he could assist.

4. Approval of the July 18, 2024, Meeting Minutes

A Motion was made by Saeedullah Taraky and seconded by Jonathan Atkinson to approve the July 18, 2024; meeting minutes as presented.

5. Presentations: None

6. Report on Chief Administrative Officer:

Personnel: No personnel issues to currently address

Budget:

- a. Mr. Lee reviewed the July and August 2024 financial reports, noting that the budget is on track and in good financial standing. Two key items will be presented for approval at the meeting: the 2025 Minimum Municipal Obligation (MMO) for staff pensions and the reduced 2025 operating budget, which has been lowered from \$506,000 to \$450,000, primarily due to savings in legal and professional services.
- b. He also provided an update on a meeting with the County Executive regarding the \$1.5 million approved by County Council, which remains unreleased. The Commission views this as a legal matter between the County Executive and County Council.
- c. Mr. Lee reported that the September 2024 audit, conducted by Maloney, Reed, and Scarpitti & Co., found no material weaknesses or deficiencies, and confirmed full compliance with COVID-19 recovery fund requirements. He thanked his team and expressed satisfaction with the outcome.

Media and Presentations: None

Grants Development:

The Commission remains committed to advancing Phase Two of its plan, which includes homeownership, apprenticeship, and healthcare initiatives. However, the implementation of these initiatives is contingent upon securing the additional \$1.5 million in funding.

Website Development and Branding:

Mr. Lee continues to collaborate with Kate & Company and their team on strategic planning and branding efforts, including website development and social media outreach. Commissioner Taraky and Mr. Lee are actively working with Kate and her team to enhance these processes. I strongly encourage you to keep your

Council representatives and networks informed about our social media presence, website updates, and the initiatives we plan to undertake, pending the additional \$1.5 million in funding.

Other Noteworthy Updates include:

- i. Mr. Lee began by sharing key insights from his attendance at the 2024 National Urban League Conference in New Orleans from July 24th to 28th. The event focused on the state of the Black and Brown communities and featured executive leaders from government and the public and private sectors. One major takeaway, particularly regarding Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), is that DEI remains an ongoing journey rather than a destination.
- ii. Lee highlighted a significant point: following the George Floyd incident, corporations pledged \$50 billion toward DEI efforts. However, as of today, only \$250 million—just 0.5% of the pledged amount—has been spent. He noted the disparity between financial commitments and actual spending, comparing it to local financial pledges, which initially started at \$10 million, decreased to \$7 million, and ultimately landed at \$3.5 million. The Commission is still awaiting action on the remaining \$1.5 million.
- iii. Lee emphasized that while commitments have been made, follow-through has been lacking. He also touched on the numerous lawsuits at the national level related to DEI, which appear designed to distract and intimidate corporations from honoring their financial commitments. He stressed the importance of continuing to push for meaningful action in this area.

Commissioner Saeed Taraky then inquired about any updates from Kate & Company following their recent meeting.

Mr. Lee responded that Kate & Company had developed an action plan and were producing three video reels featuring companies that have benefited from the Commission's investments. Two reels have been posted so far, but the goal is to create at least four or five. They are also working on organizing a roundtable discussion with business owners and elected officials, and the Chairman will be consulted on this initiative.

Lee noted that improving the Commission's social media presence remains a priority, and while Kate & Company has made progress, there is still room for further enhancement in this area. These are the key updates regarding Kate & Company's ongoing efforts.

2024 Fiesta on the Square: Mr. Lee continued by celebrating the success of the 2024 Fiesta on the Square, an event sponsored by the Commission. He expressed his gratitude to Commissioner Cortes and Chairman Dr. Rocky for their leadership in organizing the event, which was a tremendous success.

Additionally, Lee congratulated Commissioner Cortes for being invited to the Governor's Mansion in recognition of National Hispanic Heritage Month, which runs from September 15th to October 15th, 2024. He acknowledged this as a true honor and praised Commissioner Cortes for her continued outstanding work.

As always, Mr. Lee extended his sincere appreciation to all the Commissioners, particularly the Executive Committee, for their knowledge, expertise, and dedication to the Commission's mission. As he often says, we do not make excuses, we make adjustments.

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

Finance Committee-

- i. Commission Treasurer Ejay Fyke began his report by referencing the update provided by CAO Lee, noting that the audit and the current budget of \$450,000 are in good shape. He then shared details of his conversation with Councilman Horton from the previous Friday. Fyke had initially thought Horton had spoken to Mr. Lee, but Horton called Fyke directly to express his commitment to securing funding for the Commission, whether it be the \$1.5 million or another source.
- ii. Fyke explained to Horton the Commission's timeline, indicating potential financial challenges by the spring of next year. Horton assured him that he would do everything in his power to ensure the Commission continues to operate, asking for collaborative efforts from the Commission as well. Although Horton did not provide specific details on how he plans to secure the funding, Fyke offered to follow up with him after the meeting to obtain more information. Horton's message was clear: the Commission will have the necessary resources to continue its work next year.

Grants Review Committee- No Report

Commission Secretary Brandy Cortes began her report by expressing her gratitude to Mr. Lee and Dr. Rocky for their continued support. She acknowledged their unwavering commitment to the community and commended Dr. Rocky for his humility and dedication, stating, "Your contributions often go unrecognized, but they are invaluable." Cortes emphasized her pride in being part of a diverse group, each member bringing their unique expertise and commitment, despite the voluntary nature of their work.

She reflected on the success of the Fiesta, noting that it continues to grow each year. However, she expressed concern that the reported numbers do not accurately represent the Hispanic and Latino populations in Erie and Erie County. Cortes suggested that the DEI could consider strategies to improve outreach and education, particularly regarding the importance of census participation, which impacts funding and community protections.

Cortes praised the turnout at the event, highlighting its diversity and the sense of community it fostered. She also thanked Mr. Lee for supporting vendors who may have struggled with the vendor fees, acknowledging the financial realities of organizing such events.

Additionally, she spoke about her experience attending a Hispanic Heritage Month event at the Governor's Mansion, where she connected with leaders from across Pennsylvania, all of whom are engaged in public and private sectors. Cortes noted that discussions focused on engaging the Hispanic and Latino communities. She mentioned collaborating with the Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs (DDAP) to address substance use disorders and gambling issues affecting the BIPOC community. Cortes reiterated the importance of community engagement in finding solutions and expressed her appreciation for the efforts of everyone involved. She concluded by encouraging continued collaboration to build a lasting legacy.

Executive Committee-

Chairman Ricardo Escajadillo concluded the reports of the executive committees, by providing updates from the Executive Committee. He expressed his gratitude and congratulations to Chief Administrative Officer Gary Lee and Devan for their successful audit, highlighting their full compliance with financial standards. He acknowledged that audits often create anxiety, but their diligent stewardship of taxpayer dollars was evident in the positive audit outcome.

Escajadillo also recognized Vice Chair Commissioner Atkinson for his significant contributions to the community and expressed his appreciation for working alongside him. He commended Commissioner Brandy Cortes for her leadership in the Erie Latino leadership initiatives and the Mayor's Hispanic Latino Advisory Council. He extended a special thanks to Mayor Schember for the outstanding Fiesta on the Square event, noting the diverse food offerings and vibrant atmosphere that encouraged dancing.

He humorously recounted an invitation to lead a movement break at the Fiesta but admitted he needed to improve his Spanish skills to engage more fully with his cultural roots. Escajadillo announced an upcoming event at the VA on October 7th, featuring speakers, including Commissioner Cortes, a veteran speaker, and a DJ, as part of the Hispanic Heritage Month celebrations.

He encouraged all Commissioners to actively engage with their Council representatives regarding the crucial \$1.5 million funding, emphasizing its importance for future success. He thanked Attorney Wachter for attending the Executive Committee meeting, even amidst a busy schedule, and appreciated the insights shared about planning for 2025, particularly regarding highlighting successes and providing a blueprint for future initiatives.

In closing, he reaffirmed the commitment to uplifting the BIPOC community and thanked everyone for their efforts, ready to move on to the next item of business.

8. Unfinished Business-None

9. New Business:

- i. Chairman Ricardo Escajadillo stated that the first item under new business is the 2025 Minimum Municipal Obligation for the pension plan. Commissioner Saeed Taraky sought clarification, prompting Mr. Gary Lee to explain that the pension contribution is calculated at 5% of salaries, with a projected need of \$10,340 for 2025, which will be reported to the Pennsylvania Municipal Retirement System. Commissioner Dr. Sarah Carter raised a concern about potential funding shortages, asking if the obligation could be prorated. Mr. Lee confirmed that it could be prorated since they make quarterly payments. Dr. Sarah thanked him for the explanation.

A motion was made by Vice Chairman Jonathan Atkinson and seconded by Commission Treasurer Ejay Fyke and Commissioner Saeedullah Taraky, to 2025 Minimum Municipal Obligation for the pension plan. All commissioners present voted in favor.

- ii. Chairman Ricardo Escajadillo introduced the projected 2025 operating budget for discussion and approval. Commission Treasurer Ejay Fyke asked if the previously discussed severance was included, which Mr. Gary Lee confirmed. The severance would be reflected under "Salaries and Wages" and prorated in a worst-case scenario where the Commission ceased operations.

Commissioner Jonathan inquired about the budget's funding status, and Treasurer Fyke confirmed that the budget was backed by cash on hand. Mr. Lee added that the current funding is sufficient to cover operations until March 2025. However, approval of the remaining \$1.5 million would be needed to meet the full 2025 budget.

A motion was made by Commissioner Saeedullah Taraky and seconded by Commission Treasurer Ejay Fyke, to approve the projected 2025 Operating Budget. All commissioners present voted in favor.

10. Adjournment

A motion was made by Commission Treasurer Ejay Fyke and seconded by Vice Chairman Jonathan Atkinson to adjourn the meeting at 6:48P.M. All commissioners present voted in favor.

Invitees: Art Leopold- Erie Racial Justice Policy Initiative and AJ Rao ETN