

ERIE COUNTY DIVERSE ERIE COMMISSION

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, January 16, 2025

Diverse Erie Headquarters

208 East Bayfront Parkway, Suite 104, Erie, PA 16507

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87152292636?pwd=0GJpE8rdgCam7gy7TDjrPulaCi6yLn.1>

Meeting ID: 871 5229 2636

Passcode: 071731

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 6:00 P.M.- Paul Kokhanevich- Was Not Present

2. Approval of the January 16, 2025, Agenda

A Motion was made by Commission Treasurer Ejay Fyke and seconded by Commission Vice Chairman Jonathan Atkinson to approve the January 16, 2025; meeting agenda as presented. All commissioners present voted in favor. None were opposed.

3. Hearing of the Public:

Mr. Leopold acknowledged the first meeting of the New Year and reiterated concerns about the ongoing challenges in securing support for DEI efforts under the new administration. He emphasized that DEI has been a long-standing issue and expressed appreciation for the commission members' dedication.

He highlighted that the struggles are not limited to specific communities or corporations but extend to local government, noting that both the County Council and County Executive are facing similar challenges. However, he shared some positive news regarding recent legal developments that may require funding for the DEI Commission, though this is still pending.

Mr. Leopold also mentioned that Diverse Erie may need to consider legal action to secure the release of the \$1.5 million investment, though he noted this should not be necessary. He commended Diverse Erie for its impactful work in the community and encouraged continued perseverance, emphasizing that the commission's efforts are crucial to achieving long-term success.

4. Approval of November 21, 2024, Meeting Minutes

A Motion was made by Commission Secretary Brandy Cortes and seconded by Commission Vice Chairman Jonathan Atkinson to approve the November 21, 2024; meeting minutes as presented.

5. Presentations: None

6. Report on Chief Administrative Officer:

Personnel: None

Budget:

- a. The Finance Committee reviewed the financial reports for November and December 2024, including the updated budget overview, banking statements, and supporting documents. The financial statements for the year ending December 31, 2024, are being prepared by Buseck, Barger, Bleil & Co., the Commission's accounting firm. Overall, the budget remains in good shape, and the Commission is operating within the expected financial parameters.
- b. Mr. Lee provided an update on the County Council's ongoing efforts to release the \$1.5 million from the 2024 budget. The Commission has taken a legal stance on this matter. Mr. Lee has been working closely with Attorney Tim Wachter and his team to provide the requested documentation for the lawsuit. Attorney Wachter will give an update later in the meeting.
- c. The Commission is also collaborating with the Erie County Planning and Community Development Departments to ensure compliance with the county's documentation requirements. While the Commission has met the guidelines set by the U.S. Treasury Department in the 2023 audit report, the county issued additional requirements in a letter dated December 26, 2024. The Commission is making every effort to meet these new requests.
- d. Mr. Lee also mentioned that the Commission has successfully moved into new office space at 208 Bayfront Parkway, in the West Wing of Suite 104, a development that has generated excitement within the team.

Media and Presentations: None

Grants Development:

- a. The Commission is awaiting additional funding from the county before moving forward with Phase Two of its strategic plan, which includes initiatives focused on homeownership, apprenticeships, and healthcare.

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. The Diverse Erie Small Business Loan Fund, managed by the Erie County Redevelopment Authority, has been very successful. We initially invested \$500,000, which has leveraged an additional \$1.5 million, bringing the total fund to \$2 million. Currently, approximately 15 loans have been issued to small, diverse businesses, totaling around \$1.4 million in investments. This leaves roughly \$600,000 available for further lending. Additional details will be provided as the Erie County Redevelopment Authority shares further updates. We are pleased with the performance of the small business loan fund thus far.

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 noted his planned attendance at the Pennsylvania Society event in New York, where Mr. Hagan was to receive the 2024 Gold Medal for Distinguished Achievement. Unfortunately, due to inclement weather, he was unable to attend but looks forward to future opportunities.

Mr. Lee then discussed the current challenges surrounding Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives across corporate America. He expressed disappointment that several major companies, including Walmart, Amazon, McDonald's, and Apple, have scaled back their DEI programs. Despite this, Mr. Lee emphasized the Commission's ongoing commitment to addressing economic inequities in Erie County, particularly for Black and Brown communities. He highlighted the need for continued efforts despite setbacks and pointed to the underwhelming spending on DEI initiatives, with only 0.5% \$250 million of the \$50 billion pledged by Corporate America actually spent.

Looking ahead to Black History Month in February, Mr. Lee outlined the Commission's plans to honor influential African Americans, such as John Hope Bryant, Janice Bryant Howroyd, and Alex Karp. These individuals have made significant contributions in business and other sectors. The Commission will showcase their achievements to inspire and encourage continued progress, particularly in recognition of Black History Month.

Mr. Lee concluded by expressing his appreciation for the Commissioners, especially for the Executive Committee, for their ongoing support and expertise in advancing the Commission's mission. He reiterated the Commission's commitment to adapting and making progress despite challenges.

The Commission discussed plans for Black History Month, with Secretary Cortes suggesting the recognition of local individuals and businesses. CAO Gary Lee agreed and confirmed that some notable local figures would be honored. Treasurer Fyke proposed inviting high-profile individuals like John Hope Bryant to Erie to strengthen networking opportunities. Gary Lee acknowledged the difficulty of reaching such figures but reiterated his commitment to reconnecting with them for potential future collaboration.

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

7. Reports of Committee Chairpersons

Executive Committee-

Chairman Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo began his report by thanking everyone for their time and effort in attending the meeting, acknowledging the challenging start to 2025 with the tough and cold conditions but emphasizing that the team continues to push forward.

- i. Dr. Escajadillo urged commission board members to contact their Council representatives regarding the release of the approved \$1.5 million and the additional \$2.5 million for the projected 2025 budget. He stressed that resolving the funding issue is critical to the Commission's future and that it is essential to work together to secure the proper funding.
- ii. Dr. Escajadillo emphasized the importance of being aligned on the status of board appointments, particularly since some commissioners' terms expired at the end of 2024.

He encouraged commissioners who wish to continue serving on the board to communicate their intentions to their Council representative.

- iii. Dr. Escajadillo highlighted the importance of continuing to identify and engage in various activities such as DEI trainings and community events, as discussed earlier by Commissioner Brandy. These activities will help promote education and provide support to the community throughout 2025.
- iv. Dr. Escajadillo provided an update on the "whole health initiative" as part of the ongoing efforts to address the chronic pain epidemic and broader healthcare issues. He recommended simple, "10-minute therapeutic lifestyle changes," such as getting out of a chair and performing exercises like sitting cross-legged, sitting on heels, or practicing deep squats. These activities can improve musculoskeletal health and help fight conditions like diabetes, hypertension, and chronic pain.
- v. Dr. Escajadillo reflected on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, acknowledging the significance of his "I Have a Dream" speech and the ongoing progress made in society. He emphasized the continued fight for equality and the importance of moving forward despite challenges.
- vi. Dr. Escajadillo recognized a milestone in sports, highlighting that Marcus Freeman, the head coach of Notre Dame, became the first coach of mixed African American and Asian descent to lead a major national program. He also noted similar progress at Penn State.

Dr. Escajadillo concluded by expressing his optimism for 2025 and the potential for success in the year ahead, stating, "Let's thrive in 2025."

Commission Secretary Brandy Cortes expressed her appreciation for Dr. Escajadillo's mention of the achievement at Notre Dame, noting her pride in the milestone and the significant progress made in diversity within sports coaching. She also mentioned similar achievements at Penn State and emphasized the importance of these role models.

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-

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:

The Commission discussed the nomination and election of the 2025 executive officers. Commission Secretary Brandy Cortes recommended retaining the current leadership team, including Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo as Chair, Jonathan Atkinson as Vice Chair, and Ejay Fyke as Treasurer, citing positive feedback on their performance.

A motion to retain the current slate was made and seconded. There were no additional nominations, and the slate was unanimously approved.

For the position of Secretary, Brandy Cortes was nominated by Commission Treasurer Fyke and seconded by, Vice Chairman Jonathan Atkinson. No further nominations were made, and the Motion to appoint her as Secretary was also unanimously approved. All commissioners present voted in favor.

10. Adjournment

A motion was made by Commissioner Treasurer Ejay Fyke and seconded by Commission Secretary Brandy Cortes to adjourn the meeting at 6:32 P.M. All commissioners present voted in favor.

Invitees: Art Leopold-Erie County Citizen and member of The Erie Racial Justice Policy Initiative, AJ Rao of Erie Times News, and Akram Bhatti, Director of Refugee Services at Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Erie, Project Director @ Elevate Success- Math and English Tutoring in Partnership Erie School District, and Adjunct Professor of Computer Science @ Erie County Community College