

ERIE COUNTY DIVERSE ERIE COMMISSION

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, March 20, 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: Brandy Cortes; Dr. Sarah E. Carter; Saeedullah Taraky; Ejay Fyke; Wayne Patterson; Gary N. Lee; Attorney Tim Wachter

1. Call to Order/Roll Call 6:03 P.M.
2. Attorney Tim Wachter called the meeting to order and confirmed a quorum.

Attorney Tim Wachter announced that before proceeding with the approval of the agenda, it is appropriate, at this time to address the recent resignations of the Commission Board Chairman Dr. Ricardo Escajadillo and Board Vice-Chairman Mr. Jonathan Atkinson. Tim said that given these vacancies, board members must appoint new officers, specifically for the positions of President and Vice President.

A Motion was made by Commission Secretary Brandy Cortes and seconded by Commissioner Ejay Fyke to nominate Saeedullah Taraky for Chairman of the Board. Saeedullah accepted the nomination. With no additional nominations, the nomination for chairman process was closed at 6:05 PM.

A Motion was made by Commissioner Ejay Fyke and seconded by Commissioner Wayne Patterson to elect Saeedullah Taraky as Chairman of the commission board. All commissioners present voted in favor. None were opposed.

A Motion was made by Chairman Saeedullah Taraky and seconded by Commission Secretary Brandy Cortes to nominate Ejay Fyke for Vice Chairman of the Board. Ejay accepted the nomination. With no additional nominations, the nomination for Vice Chairman process was closed at 6:06 PM.

A Motion was made by Commissioner Wayne Patterson and seconded Commission Secretary Brandy Cortes to Patterson to elect Ejay Fyke as Vice Chairman of the Commission board. All commissioners present voted in favor. None were opposed.

A Motion was made by Vice Chairman Ejay Fyke and seconded by Commission Secretary Brandy Cortes to nominate Wayne Patterson for Treasurer of the Board. Wayne accepted the nomination. With no additional nominations, the nomination for Treasurer process was closed at 6:07 PM.

A Motion was made by Commission Secretary Brandy Cortes and seconded by Commission Vice Chairman Ejay Fyke to elect Wayne Patterson as treasurer of the commission board. All commissioners present voted in favor. None were opposed.

3. Approval of the March 20, 2025, Agenda

A Motion was made by Commission Treasurer Wayne Patterson and seconded by Commission Vice Chairman Ejay Fyke to approve the March 20, 2025; meeting agenda as presented. All commissioners present voted in favor. None were opposed.

4. Hearing of the Public: None

5. Approval of January 16, 2025, Meeting Minutes

A Motion was made by Commission Secretary Brandy Cortes and seconded by Commission Chairman Saeedullah Taraky to approve January 16, 2025; meeting minutes as presented.

6. Presentations: None

7. Report on Chief Administrative Officer:

Gary Lee congratulated the Commissioners for their new roles within the Commission, including Commissioner Taraky as Chair, Commissioner Fyke as Vice Chair, Commissioner Cortes continuing as Secretary, and Mr. Patterson as Treasurer.

Mr. Lee expressed his enthusiasm for working with each of these individuals in their respective roles and emphasized the importance of collaboration in moving the Commission's efforts forward.

Personnel: There were no updates to report regarding personnel matters at this time.

Budget:

- a. Mr. Lee said that the Finance Committee conducted a detailed review of the following financial documents: January and February 2025 financial reports, budget vs. actuals, updated budget overview, banking statements and related expenses.
- b. Mr. Lee provided an update on the 2025 budget, explaining to the group that it has been reduced by 24%, from an initially approved amount of \$450,000 to \$345,000 following negotiations with the county despite this reduction, the current budget is in good financial standing, and operations are continuing within the financial parameters established by the Commission.
- c. Gary Lee provided an update regarding the legal settlement with the County Executive, confirming that the settlement has been finalized with both Diverse Erie and the County Executive having signed all required documents. The final order will now be submitted to the judge for approval. Once signed by the judge, the Commission is expected to receive a \$1.5 million check within seven days. Mr. Lee recognized the considerable amount of time and effort invested in resolving the matter, particularly in collaboration with Attorney Wachter and his team. He expressed optimism about advancing to the next phase of the Commission's work.

Sarah Carter asked if the seven-day period had already commenced. Mr. Lee clarified that the seven-day countdown had not yet started, as the final documents had only recently been submitted for review. There was a delay due to the County Executive's travel, but the documents were signed earlier this week. Attorney Tim Wachter added that the seven-day clock would begin once the judge signs the order, which was submitted today. The language in the proposed order has been fully agreed upon by both the County Executive's legal team and the Commission's legal team. The judge is expected to sign the order shortly, and at that point, the seven-day period will begin. Sarah Carter expressed her gratitude to Attorney Wachter for the clarification.

Gary Lee reminded all attendees that the financial statements of interest are due by March 21, 2025. He added that those who have not yet completed the required documents are asked to submit them by the close of

business tomorrow. Mr. Lee added that these statements are required to be kept on file by the State Board of Ethics.

Media and Presentations:

- a. In the coming weeks, Mr. Lee said that he will be speaking with local media and participating in interviews regarding the Diverse Erie Impact Study, which is set to be released shortly before the end of the month. He said that he received the final copy today, and we are excited about this milestone.
- b. Gary Lee stated that, a great deal of time and effort went into ensuring the accuracy and verification of the data, working closely with Parker Strategy Group to confirm all details. Before the public release, he added that all the commissioners will receive a copy of the study. We anticipate making it available within the next week.

Grants Development:

- a. Gary Lee provided an update on Grants Review Committee activities stated that, upon selection of the committee, a meeting will be scheduled to review Phase 2 of the strategic plan, which focuses on initiatives in homeownership, apprenticeships, healthcare, and small business development. These initiatives were submitted to the Erie Planning Department for approval.

Commissioner Cortes has requested to be part of the Grants Review Committee, and other appointments will be made by the Chair.

- b. Mr. Lee continued by stating that currently Miss Devan Mitchell is managing our social media posts. He asked the commissioners to please share any relevant information with her so we can ensure posted keeping our social media presence active is a priority.
- c. Gary Lee said Parker Strategy has provided a potential candidate interested in overseeing our public relations, specifically for social media. We will be reaching out to discuss this opportunity further. Mr. Lee added that he has also contacted another individual to gauge their interest in collaborating with our commission; however, they are currently very busy and have not yet responded.

Mr. Lee emphasized the importance of continuing to feature diverse businesses on social media. He also discussed ongoing efforts to identify a social media manager and encouraged any suggestions for qualified candidates.

In response to a question from Vice Chairman Ejay Fyke regarding engagement strategy, Gary confirmed that Parker Strategy Group is working on a communication plan. This includes: a press conference, social media outreach, and Gary appearing on local media outlets to promote the study. Mr. Lee also mentioned that the social media campaign will include a personalized approach to maximize engagement with the community.

Regarding an internship opportunity, Vice Chairman Fyke suggested reaching out to local universities to find a social media intern. Gary agreed, noting that funds are available in the budget for a paid internship.

- d. Gary Lee provided a summary of the Diverse Erie Impact Study:
 - A \$3.5 million investment from the County of Erie resulted in \$5.7 million in business investments.

- 32 jobs have been sustained, and approximately \$194,000 in local and state taxes have been generated.
- 54 small businesses have been supported, and a \$500,000 small business fund was created in partnership with the Erie County Redevelopment Authority, leveraging an additional \$1.5 million.

Gary emphasized that the leveraging of these funds has resulted in a total impact of approximately \$4 million. He added that the report also features small businesses benefiting from this investment, including Lake Erie Woodworks, Sew Royalty, Nature's Beauty, and Barb's Family Daycare. Additional businesses were contacted but did not respond to outreach.

Website Development and Branding:

- a. Gary Lee emphasized the importance of featuring successful individuals and businesses on social media and the Commission's website. Chairman Saeedullah Taraky supported this initiative and suggested focusing on highlighting women entrepreneurs during Women's History Month.
- b. Gary Lee shared that three commissioner seats are currently vacant, with Anthony Simmons recently appointed to one of them. He also encouraged members to submit recommendations for other potential candidates to fill the remaining vacancies, either to him or their Council person.

The overall focus is on increasing community visibility through social media and filling commissioner vacancies to strengthen the Commission's work.

Other Noteworthy Updates include:

Mr. Lee shared their excitement about being named to the City & State 2025 Black Trailblazers list, alongside other notable honorees such as Auditor General Tim Defoor and Speaker Joanna McClendon. He said that the event was an inspiring experience, and the speaker was proud to represent Erie County.

Additionally, Commissioner Dr. Sarah Carter was congratulated for being honored as a "Woman Making History" by the Mercy Center for Women.

Gary Lee said that he also attended a meeting hosted by the Erie Community Foundation on March 19th, discussing the refugee crisis in Erie County. Key points included addressing funding challenges for refugee-serving organizations, developing a public awareness campaign, and engaging the private sector to highlight the economic contributions of immigrants. The meeting emphasized the importance of shifting public perceptions, sharing success stories of immigrants, and fostering entrepreneurship to benefit the community. The discussion also highlighted Erie County's population decline, with the immigrant population playing a crucial role in mitigating it, contributing an estimated \$273 million to the economy.

The overall focus was on improving public awareness, collaboration, and changing mindsets to ensure long-term community growth.

8. Reports of Committee Chairpersons

Executive Committee- None

Finance Committee- None

Grants Review Committee- Pending Appointments

Commission Secretary Brandy Cortes had nothing to report.

9. Unfinished Business: No Unfinished Business

10. New Business:

Newly elected Chairman Saeedullah Taraky said that he has been appointed to the Governor's Advisory Board for Asian American and Pacific Islanders, recognizing his leadership in DEI efforts. He will represent the DEI Commission and continue advocating for diverse communities. His work with Erie's Afghan community, including supporting families and establishing a nonprofit, contributed to his selection. He expressed gratitude and emphasized his commitment to outreach and collaboration. Attorney Tim Wachter and Gary Lee commended his contributions, reinforcing the importance of inclusive opportunities for businesses and residents.

11. Adjournment

A motion was made by Commission Treasurer Wayne Patterson and seconded by Commission Secretary Saeedullah Taraky to adjourn the meeting at 6:39 P.M. All commissioners present voted in favor.

Invitees: AJ Rao of Erie Times