

# **ERIE COUNTY DIVERSITY, EQUITY, & INCLUSION COMMISSION**

## **Meeting Minutes**

Thursday, May 15, 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 6:02 P.M.

Attorney Kennedy extended a warm welcome to the newly appointed commissioners and invited each to introduce themselves to the group.

Commissioner Sara Shinsky shared that she is originally from Colombia, South America, and has been part of the local community for approximately 3 years. She currently serves as a branch manager at Northwest Savings Bank and has been married since the age of 20 and has an 8-year-old son. Ms. Shinsky expressed her love for reading and strong involvement in community initiatives. She stated that she is pleased to join the commission and looks forward to contributing meaningfully.

Commissioner Anthony Simmons introduced himself as a business owner of 911Express Optical, in Edinboro, PA. He said that he is a dedicated community servant with 33 years of marriage. He emphasized his passion for service, both through his church and other community engagements. Mr. Simmons expressed enthusiasm about joining the commission and a desire to support and uplift others.

### 2. Approval of May 15, 2025, Agenda

A Motion was made by Commission Treasurer Wayne Patterson and seconded by Commission Vice Chairman Ejay Fyke to approve the May 15, 2025; meeting agenda as presented. All commissioners present voted in favor. None were opposed.

### 3. Hearing from the Public:

Brandon Wiley, licensed mental health therapist and founder of OpenedEyes, shared his gratitude and presented a bold new initiative titled "From Burnout to Belonging: Building the Future of Cultural Wellness in Erie, PA." OpenedEyes is a consulting organization specializing in culturally conscious conversations, working with diverse sectors to promote emotional and professional well-being. Based on client feedback and growing demand, OpenedEyes is expanding its scope to include direct coaching and counseling services.

Wiley highlighted a partnership with Sarah A. Reed Children's Center as the foundation for this wellness expansion. The collaboration includes four key components:

- **Healing the Healers:** Launching a temporary wellness suite at Sarah Reed to support frontline staff with trauma-informed leadership, coaching, and culturally responsive self-care.
- **Prototype Wellness Center:** Creating a replicable, community-based model that provides real-time, evidence-based outcomes in culturally competent care.
- **Youth Leadership Integration (LENS Program):** Implementing a youth-focused program emphasizing perception, resilience, and communication. LENS has already seen success in local schools, supporting students experiencing trauma and mental health challenges.
- **Inclusive Outreach:** Engaging underserved and marginalized populations through a model grounded in the U.S. Surgeon General's 5 Essentials for Mental Health and well-being.

Wiley emphasized the urgent need to support both mental health providers and underserved communities through culturally relevant care. He called for community and institutional investment in an OpenedEyes Wellness Center to expand this work, strengthen Erie's mental health infrastructure, and sustain generational healing and wellness.

#### 4. Approval of March 20, 2025, Meeting Minutes

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

#### 5. Presentations:

Matt Harris, Vice President of the East Side Renaissance, Paul Hamilton, Executive Director of East Side Renaissance (ESR) and Alivia Haibach the Multicultural Health Evaluation Delivery System (MHEDS), in partnership with David Brennan – Senior Director, and Danielle Mihna – Architect, at Bostwick Design Partnership presented plans for a new community-based health facility to be located at 908–912 Parade Street in Erie's East Side. This project directly addresses critical healthcare gaps in a historically underserved area and is part of a broader neighborhood revitalization strategy.

#### Organizational Background

- East Side Renaissance (ESR): A grassroots organization focused on restoring economic and social value to neglected areas of Erie's East Side, particularly the Parade Street corridor.
- MHEDS: A federally qualified health center currently serving one-quarter of Erie's low-income population, the majority of whom are Medicaid recipients and non-English speakers.

#### Project Justification

- Health Disparities: A 15-year life expectancy gap exists between Erie ZIP codes 16508 and 16503—just 10 minutes.
- Limited Access: Only 35% of 16503 residents have access to a primary care provider.
- High-Need Population: 85% of MHEDS patients are on Medicaid; 92% require care in a language other than English.

## **Facility Details**

**Location:** 908–912 Parade Street, Erie, PA

### **Scope of Services:**

- Primary and pediatric care
- Dental and optometry services
- Mental health counseling
- Physical, occupational, and chiropractic therapy
- On-site pharmacy

### **Design Elements:**

- Adaptive reuse of two existing buildings; selective demolition to create a public courtyard
- Fully ADA-compliant with an elevator and stair tower
- Community conference space and integration of local art to promote cultural inclusion
- Expected Impact
- Enhanced access to essential healthcare services for underserved populations
- Economic revitalization through job creation, foot traffic, and reinvestment in vacant properties
- Advancement of equity and inclusion in alignment with DEI Commission priorities

### **Request to the DEI Commission**

The project team formally requested the DEI Commission's support and potential funding assistance to help bring this transformational health equity project to fruition.

### **Supplemental Resources**

- East Side Renaissance: [www.eastsiderenaissance.org](http://www.eastsiderenaissance.org)
- MHEDS: [www.mheds.org](http://www.mheds.org)

This initiative represents more than a medical facility, it is a strategic investment in community healing, racial equity, and systemic change. ESR and MHEDS seek the DEI Commission's partnership to make this vision a reality.

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

Mr. Lee began his report by saying, first, he would like to extend a warm welcome to our newest Commissioners, Commissioner Sara Shinsky and Commissioner Anthony Simmons. He said that he had the pleasure of meeting with each of them individually to provide an orientation on the Commission's work. Mr. Lee is genuinely excited about the opportunity to collaborate with both of you as we continue advancing our mission.

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

### **Budget:**

Mr. Lee reported that the Finance Committee reviewed the Commission's March and April 2025 financials, including budget-to-actual reports, an updated budget summary, and supporting bank and expenditure documentation. He stated that the Commission's 2025 budget totals \$440,000,

comprising \$95,000 in unspent funds from the original \$3.5 million allocation and \$345,000 from a recently approved \$1.5 million settlement. The Commission remains within its approved financial parameters. Chairman Taraky, will provide future updates on potential funding opportunities.

#### Media and Presentations:

Mr. Lee reported that he participated in multiple local media interviews following the release of the Diverse Erie Economic Impact Study on March 31, 2025. Outlets included Erie News Now (NBC/CBS), Talk Erie 814, Chatting with Sonya, and YourErie (ABC/Fox). He also acknowledged a front-page article by journalist AJ Rao and expressed his appreciation for the coverage. Mr. Lee commended the media for helping to amplify the Commission's message and emphasized the continued importance of public engagement.

#### Grants Development:

Mr. Lee announced that the Commission is preparing to launch Phase II of its Strategic Plan, with key focus areas including homeownership, apprenticeship programs, healthcare access, and small business development. He noted that he and Attorney Wachter are currently drafting program guidelines and policies. The Grants Review Committee is scheduled to meet in June to finalize timelines and application procedures, with a public release of applications anticipated in July 2025.

#### Website Development and Branding:

- a. Mr Lee began his report by stating that Miss Devan Mitchell and the Parker Strategy Group have been effectively managing the Commission's social media presence. He said that their efforts have significantly increased our online activity—more than we have seen over the past year—and we are excited by this progress.
- b. Mr. Lee shared that earlier this week, a recent *Washington Post* article discussing DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) efforts in Erie. He noted that while the article was informative, it appeared to frame the local DEI narrative through a lens of scarcity rather than abundance. This highlights the importance of maintaining a strong, proactive communication and outreach strategy.
- c. Mr. Lee expressed concern that the article's portrayal of the community, particularly through its imagery and selection of interviewees, did not fully reflect the depth of ongoing development efforts. Some of the individuals interviewed had little or no direct involvement in the revitalization of the area. While the piece included input from local leadership, such as the Mayor and County Executive, it also emphasized divisions and included, in his view, unnecessary rhetoric.
- d. He emphasized the value of the partnership with Parker Strategy Group, which extends beyond social media to include the development of op-eds and strategic messaging. This collaboration is key to ensuring that the narrative around the community is accurate, aspirational, and representative of local perspectives.

Mr. Lee emphasized the importance of ongoing communication and urged Commission members to keep their Council representatives and community networks informed. He highlighted the need to

promote the Commission's social media platforms and foster broader public engagement to help shape a compelling and accurate narrative at the local, national, and global levels.

Other Noteworthy Updates include:

Mr. Lee said that on April 30 attended the 2025 Municipal Law Symposium hosted by the Knox Law Institute. The training included several important sessions, including a mock public meeting and legislative updates. The session Mr. Lee focused on was titled "What Employers Should Expect from the Trump Administration," which he described as both educational and insightful.

Key takeaways included:

- Executive orders under the Trump administration impacting DEI and workplace practices
- The distinction between executive authority and established law
- The likelihood of legal disputes escalating to the U.S. Supreme Court

Mr. Lee noted that while a president can set strategic direction for federal agencies via executive orders, federal law ultimately takes precedence—though interpretation often falls to the courts. He commended the presenters for their clarity and thanked the Knox Law team, particularly Pat and Tim, for offering this high-quality, publicly accessible event.

On May 1, Mr. Lee participated in a Rapid Response Team meeting focused on the refugee resettlement crisis in Erie County. Convened by several local organizations, the meeting addressed the need for enhanced public education and awareness campaigns to combat misinformation about New Americans.

Mr. Lee confirmed the Commission's support and offered to distribute verified information through its networks and mailing lists on an ongoing basis.

To date, \$550,000 has been secured to support resettlement efforts, with the following contributions:

- \$50,000 from individual donors
- \$250,000 from Erie Insurance
- \$250,000 from the Hagen Family Foundation

A formal disbursement plan is currently in development and will be shared with the Rapid Response Team once finalized. Mr. Lee briefed the Executive Committee on the funding status.

Mr. Lee viewed the livestream release of the National Urban League's report titled: "George Floyd: Five Years Later – Was it a Moment or a Movement?"

Key points from the report:

- Although \$50 billion was pledged nationally for DEI initiatives following George Floyd's death, only \$250 million (0.5%) has been spent to date.
- The report highlights a significant gap between corporate DEI pledges and actual financial commitments.

Mr. Lee affirmed the Commission's alignment with the Urban League's mission, emphasizing the importance of accountability—not only from the federal government but also from corporate America. He reiterated the Commission's support for sustained, measurable progress in racial equity and fairness, noting that the goal is a fair shake, not a special shake, for people of color. He added that a copy of the report will be shared via email and appended to the minutes.

On May 12, Mr. Lee attended an event at the Jefferson Educational Society celebrating the 100th anniversary of Erie Insurance. The panel featured reflections from both current and former leaders, including:

- Tom Hagen, Chairman of the Board
- Tim NeCastro, President and CEO
- Martin P. Eisert, Retired Executive
- Steve Scully, Moderator and Journalist

The discussion honored the company's legacy and leadership, particularly that of Mr. H.O. Hirt and O.G. Crawford. Mr. Lee noted a standout principle shared by Mr. Hirt:

"Never lose the human touch."

He expressed that this philosophy deeply resonates with the Commission's mission to serve the community with compassion and dignity, emphasizing that at the core of their work is the belief in one race, the human race—and a commitment to equity and opportunity for all.

Mr. Lee expressed his appreciation to all Commissioners, with special acknowledgment to the Executive Committee for their continued knowledge, expertise, and dedication to advancing the Commission's mission. He concluded by stating:

"We don't make excuses—only adjustments."

A Motion was made by Commission Treasurer Wayne Patterson and seconded by Commissioner Sara Shinsky to approve the report of the Chief Administrative Officer. All commissioners present voted in favor.

## 7. Reports of Committee Chairpersons

### Executive Committee-

Chairman Saeed Taraky welcomed everyone to his first official meeting as Chair of the DEI Commission. He expressed gratitude to the commissioners for entrusting him with the role and conveyed his confidence that, working together, the commission will effectively fulfill its mission of serving Erie's diverse communities.

Chairman Taraky emphasized the importance of increasing public engagement, noting the need to hear directly from residents regarding how the DEI Commission can support their ideas and needs. As discussed in the last Executive Committee meeting, efforts will be made to invite more community members to future board meetings.

He extended a warm welcome to Commissioners Sarah Shinsky and Anthony Simmons, praising their diverse community service backgrounds and expressing confidence that their contributions will strengthen the Commission's work and impact.

The Chairman encouraged all Commissioners to:

- Engage with small businesses and civic leaders
- Invite colleagues and community members to attend board meetings
- Share the Commission's work and mission with Council representatives and broader community networks

He also reminded Commissioners about the upcoming board training workshop, encouraging full participation. Two available dates are:

- Saturday, June 14th, 9:00 AM – 12:00 PM
- Saturday, August 2nd, 9:00 AM – 12:00 PM

Details have been shared via email.

Chairman Taraky concluded his report by stating that he will soon recommend appointments for various committees and thanked all Commissioners for their willingness to serve in expanded roles.

Commission Secretary Brandy Cortes expressed deep appreciation for Chairman Taraky, calling him a visionary and a dedicated community leader. She commended his work, especially in establishing the Afghan Community Center, and acknowledged the responsibilities he is taking on in collaboration with Mr. Lee.

She also recognized:

- Commissioner Sara Shinsky for her visionary leadership and service to the Hispanic/Latino community
- Commissioner Anthony Simmons for his immediate engagement, particularly his effective participation in public relations during the CamaradErie Ribbon Cutting event.

Commissioner Cortes closed by expressing her gratitude for being part of the Commission and for the shared commitment among all members.

#### Finance Committee-

Commission Treasurer Wayne Patterson reported that the Finance Committee has not yet convened. He and Mr. Lee agreed that the committee should meet once it is fully staffed. In the interim, they reviewed financial documents together and reached consensus on all items. Additional members will be appointed to complete the committee soon.

#### Grants Review Committee- Pending Appointments

Commission Secretary Brandy Cortes had nothing to report.

8. Unfinished Business: None

9. New Business:

Chairman Saeed Taraky appointed Commissioner Sara Shinsky to the Finance Committee, joining Treasurer Wayne Patterson and Commissioner Dr. Sarah Carter. Her background in banking is expected to strengthen the Commission's financial oversight.

Chairman Taraky announced the formation of a Grant Review Committee, naming himself, Commissioner Simmons, and Commissioner Brandy Cortes as initial members. Vice Chairman EJ Fyke expressed interest in joining and was welcomed. Other Commissioners were invited to participate.

Following a prior Executive Committee meeting discussion led by Vice Chairman EJ Fyke and supported by CAO Gary Lee, a new Funding and Opportunities Strategy Committee was proposed. Vice Chairman Fyke was appointed to chair the committee, which will focus on identifying funding and partnership opportunities for the DEI Commission. Commissioners were encouraged to join. Secretary Brandy Cortes voiced support and emphasized the importance of fiscal expertise on the committee.

Chairman Taraky and CAO Lee expressed full support for the initiative, and Vice Chairman Fyke emphasized the committee's importance in securing the Commission's future sustainability.

#### 10. Adjournment

A motion was made by Commission Treasurer Wayne Patterson and seconded by Commission Vice Chairman EJ Fyke to adjourn the meeting at 6:46 P.M. All commissioners present voted in favor.

Invitees: None