

ERIE COUNTY DIVERSITY, EQUITY, & INCLUSION COMMISSION
Meeting Minutes

Thursday, November 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: Saeedullah Taraky; Ejay Fyke; Wayne Patterson; Sara Shinsky; Anthony Simmons; Junius Johnson; Gary N. Lee; Attorney Patricia Kennedy

1. Call to Order/Roll Call 6:02 P.M.
2. Approval of November 20, 2025, Agenda

A Motion was made by Commissioner Anthony Simmons and seconded by Commissioner Sara Shinsky to approve the November 20, 2025; meeting agenda as presented. All commissioners present voted in favor. None were opposed.

3. Hearing from the Public:

Mr. Art Leopold, an Erie resident, thanked the Commission for its work and shared that he had attended several council budget meetings. He noted that the council is considering allocating approximately \$500,000 to the Commission, though this amount is not final. Mr. Leopold encouraged the Commission to remain optimistic regardless of the final allocation and highlighted the value of its work, noting potential opportunities with the incoming administration.

Chairman Taraky thanked Mr. Leopold for his service and presented him with a Certificate of Appreciation on behalf of the DEI Commission. Mr. Leopold expressed his gratitude, and a photo was taken to commemorate the occasion.

4. Approval of September 18, 2025, Meeting Minutes
5. Presentations: None
6. Report on Chief Administrative Officer:

Mr. Lee welcomed newly appointed Commissioner Junius Johnson and expressed appreciation for his willingness to serve, noting that the Commission looks forward to the experience and expertise he will bring in the coming year.

Personnel:

Mr. Lee reported a proposed promotion for Ms. Devan Mitchell, whose updated Executive Administrative Assistant job description—reflecting her current duties—was provided to both the Finance and Executive Committees. He commended Ms. Mitchell's strong performance and noted that the Finance Chair would address the matter further in his report.

He also submitted the 2025 Chief Executive Officer Value and Impact Report and encouraged commissioners to review it and provide feedback.

Budget:

Mr. Lee reported that the Finance Committee received September and October 2025 financial reports, including budget-versus-actual updates, banking statements, expense documentation, and an updated financial overview. Third-quarter financial statements (ending September 30, 2025), prepared by Busick, Barger & Blail Company, were provided to both the Finance Committee and County Council. Mr. Lee stated that the Commission remains in good financial standing and is operating within its expected parameters.

As previously reported, the Commission submitted a 2026 budget request of \$1 million to the County Executive and County Council. The request was not included in the County Executive's proposed budget. On October 27, Mr. Lee, along with Commissioner Fyke and Ms. Mitchell, attended Erie County Council's budget meeting to present 2025 accomplishments and 2026 goals. Council members had no questions and expressed appreciation for the Commission's work. Mr. Lee, Commissioner Fyke, Mr. Art Leopold, and other community representatives subsequently attended public budget hearings to advocate continued investment in Diverse Erie. He expressed optimism that the Council may include a funding line item in the 2026 budget.

Media & Presentations:

Diverse Erie will announce the 2025 Generational Impact Investment Award recipients at an event scheduled for 10:00 a.m. the following morning in the rotunda at the Erie Intermodal Transportation Center. A total of \$650,000 will be awarded in the area of health equity.

Website Development & Branding:

Ms. Mitchell and Parker Strategy Group continue to manage the Commission's social media presence. Commissioners were encouraged to send relevant content for posting. The Commission is also working on communications and outreach strategies, website updates, and preparation for the 2025 Annual Report, expected to be completed by year-end. Commissioners were encouraged to share key updates with their council representatives and community networks.

Other Noteworthy Updates include:

Gary Lee stated that The Generational Impact Opportunity Initiative application period concluded successfully. Application numbers by category were:

- Health Care Initiatives: 10 applications; \$400,000 allocated
- Diversifying Construction Trades: 4 applications; \$250,000 allocated
- Improving BIPOC Homeownership: 7 applications; \$250,000 allocated

Applications in the construction trades and homeownership categories did not meet the established criteria. The Grant Review Committee recommended reallocating \$250,000 from construction trades to healthcare initiatives, and \$250,000 from homeownership to the Small Business Initiative, set to open in early 2026. Mr. Lee thanked the committee for its work; Commissioner Fyke will provide additional details under New Business.

Mr. Lee summarized several recent engagements:

- Sept. 22: Presented Commission highlights at the Infinite Erie Quarterly Leadership Meeting, resulting in new partnership discussions with local corporate leaders.
- Sept. 24–27: Attended the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation’s 54th Annual Legislative Conference in Washington, D.C., where he met national leaders including Marc Morial (National Urban League), John Hope Bryant (Operation HOPE), John Rogers (Ariel Investments), and Attorney Ben Crump. These interactions opened new networking and collaboration opportunities.
- Oct. 8: Participated in the City of Erie New American Audit, facilitated by Chairman Taraky.
- Oct. 15: Attended the Hispanic Heritage Town Hall hosted by State Rep. Bob Merski, discussing community challenges and opportunities for partnership.
- Oct. 23, 28 & 30: Attended a three-part virtual summit by the Congressional Black Alternative Foundation on economic policy, wealth building, and small business development.
- Nov. 4: Attended the Mercy Center for Women Luncheon with guest speaker Gary Gillian.
- Nov. 5: Attended a reception and speaking event with former Vice President Mike Pence, hosted by the Jefferson Educational Society, and shared updates on the Commission’s work.
- Nov. 14: Participated in the Quarterly Funders Forum hosted by the Erie Community Foundation.
- Dec. 10 (upcoming): Announced an upcoming workshop in partnership with Ben Franklin Technology Partners on the Erie Insurance Revitalization Investment Fund, which includes loan, equity, and grant opportunities with a focus on technology.

Mr. Lee concluded by thanking the Commissioners for their commitment to advancing the Commission’s mission, stating: “We don’t make excuses—we make adjustments.”

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

7. Reports of Committee Chairpersons

Executive Committee-

Chairman Taraky welcomed new Commissioner Johnson and acknowledged the contributions of Kevin, Mr. Lee, and the Grants Review Committee. He encouraged attendance at the upcoming press conference to present a unified Commission and noted plans for small-group meetings with County Council to share the Commission’s progress.

He emphasized the importance of board engagement with the community and requested commissioners identify potential events for Commission support.

Updates included:

- Erie completed its audit for Welcoming City certification, expected in December.
- Chairman Taraky concluded his role as Immigrant and Refugee Liaison and will transition to a new professional position.
- He attended meetings with the Governor’s Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Affairs and the Governor’s residence to discuss support for new Americans.
- Assisting the Somali community in establishing a new community center.
- The Afghan community graduated 120 adults from a Department of Labor-funded digital literacy program.

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He concluded by thanking commissioners for their dedication.

Finance Committee-

Treasurer Patterson reported that the Finance Committee met to review the Commission's budget and expenditures. Questions arising during the discussion were addressed and clarified by Mr. Lee, for which the Committee expressed appreciation.

The Committee then reviewed Mr. Lee's recommendation to promote Ms. Devan Mitchell. The primary discussion centered on the rationale for the promotion. Mr. Lee provided the updated job description and outlined how Ms. Mitchell's responsibilities have significantly expanded since her initial appointment. While some administrative duties remain, she now performs a number of management- and executive-level tasks.

Based on these changes, the Finance Committee recommended updating Ms. Mitchell's title from Administrative Assistant to Executive Administrative Assistant to reflect the increased scope and level of responsibility.

Treasurer Patterson concluded his report.

Grant Review Committee-

Chairman Taraky noted that the Grants Review Committee report would be discussed under new business. Commission Treasurer Wayne Patterson reported that Vice Chairman EJ Fyke was delayed at the airport and asked Mr. Lee to present the report on his behalf.

No Commission Secretary report

8. Unfinished Business: None
9. New Business:
 - i. CAO Gary N. Lee presented the Grant Review Committee's report, recommending \$650,000 in Generational Impact Investment Awards to four recipients:
 - **Birth Root Community Doula Alliance**
Request: \$250,000
Recommended Award: \$189,250
Summary: A BIPOC- and women-owned Erie-based organization, Birth Root provides culturally responsive prenatal, birth, and postpartum care aimed at reducing racial disparities in maternal health. The application received the highest evaluation scores for community impact and alignment with the Commission's diversity values, demonstrating strong potential to improve maternal and infant health outcomes.
 - **Multicultural Health Evaluation Delivery System (MEDS)**
Request: \$250,000
Recommended Award: \$189,250
Summary: Funding will support the establishment of a new healthcare facility on Parade Street, expanding services in an underserved neighborhood. With a decade of experience serving immigrant and BIPOC populations, MEDS plans to employ BIPOC contractors and professionals, ensuring economic benefits remain local.

- **St. Vincent Health System – Talent Attraction Program (TAP)**
Request: \$150,000
Recommended Award: \$150,000
Summary: TAP will invest in strengthening Erie’s healthcare workforce pipeline by expanding pathways into allied health careers for BIPOC residents seeking stable and well-paying employment. The program was highly rated for its feasibility, capacity, and long-term potential to advance economic mobility.

- **The Sight Center of Northwest Pennsylvania**
Request: \$121,500
Recommended Award: \$121,500
Summary: This initiative focuses on diabetes prevention and vision health, bringing preventive care directly into Erie neighborhoods. Using strong data tracking and partnerships with local clinics, the program aims to reduce chronic health disparities disproportionately impacting BIPOC residents, focusing on ZIP codes 16501, 16502, 16503, 16504, and 16507.

Mr. Lee confirmed that the recommended awards total **\$650,000** and submitted the recommendations to the Chairman for consideration.

The Motion was made by Commission Treasurer Wayne Patterson and seconded by Commissioner Anthony Simmons and Commissioner Sara Shinsky to approve the award of Generational Impact Investment, as recommended by the Grants Review Committee and as presented to the Commission. All commissioners present voted in favor.

- ii. Chairman Saeedullah Taraky introduced the next item under New Business regarding the proposed meeting schedule for Diverse Area for January through December 2026.
 - **Diverse Erie Board Meetings:** Every other month on the third Thursday, starting in January 2026, from 6:00 PM until adjournment.
 - **Finance Committee:** Meetings to remain on the second Wednesday of each month. While financial reports are provided monthly, full committee review will occur during the bi-monthly meetings unless otherwise determined by the Committee Chair in January.
 - **Executive Committee:** Meetings to continue on the second Thursday of each month at 6:00 PM.
 - **Strategic Fundraising and Opportunities Committee:** Newly established by the Chairman and chaired by Vice Chair Fyke. The schedule for this committee will be determined in consultation with the Chairman. Board members interested in joining this committee were invited to contact Mr. Lee.
 - **Grants Review Committee:** Meetings to occur on an as-needed basis, aligned with the grant awarding cycle.

- iii. Chairman Taraky confirmed there was interest in the Strategic Fundraising Committee and encouraged board members to join.

A motion was made by Commissioner Anthony Simmons and seconded by Commissioner Sara Shinsky to approve the proposed meeting schedule for January through December 2026, including

authorization for posting the schedule in accordance with Sunshine Act requirements. All commissioners present voted in favor.

Chairman Saeedullah Taraky introduced the discussion regarding the 2026 annual cost of living adjustment (COA) for the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO).

Mr. Lee noted that his contract provides for an annual cost-of-living adjustment (COA) of 3% to 6%, and he proposed maintaining the historical minimum increase of 3% for 2026.

A motion was made by Commission Vice Chairman Ejay Fyke and seconded Commission Treasurer Wayne Patterson to approve a 3% COA for the CAO for 2026. All commissioners present voted in favor.

iv. Chairman Saeedullah Taraky introduced the topic of promoting the administrative assistant to the position of Executive Administrative Assistant and establishing a new hourly rate.

A motion was made by Commission Treasurer Wayne Patterson and seconded by Commissioner Dr. Sarah Carter seconded to promote Ms. Devan Mitchell from Administrative Assistant to Executive Administrative Assistant, increasing her hourly rate from \$19.28 to \$23.00. All commissioners present voted in favor. None were opposed.

10. Adjournment

A motion was made by Commission Treasurer Wayne Patterson and seconded by Commissioner Sarah Carter to adjourn the meeting at 6:48 P.M. All commissioners present voted in favor.

Invitees: Art Leopold and Ron Harden