

ERIE COUNTY DIVERSE ERIE COMMISSION

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, March 19, 2026

Diverse Erie Headquarters

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

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87152292636?pwd=0GJpE8rdgCam7qy7TDjrPulaCi6yLn.1>

Meeting ID: 871 5229 2636

Passcode: 071731

Attendees: Saeedullah Taraky; Ejay Fyke; Sara Shinsky; Wayne Patterson; Anthony Simmons; Junius Johnson; William Jeffress; Gary N. Lee; Attorney Patricia Kennedy

1. Call to Order/Roll Call 6:14 P.M.
2. Approval of the March 19, 2026, Agenda

A Motion was made by Commission Vice Chairman William Jeffress and seconded by Commissioner Anthony Simmons to approve the March 19, 2026; meeting agenda as presented. All commissioners present voted in favor. None were opposed.

3. Hearing of the Public: None
4. Approval of January 15, 2026, Meeting Minutes

A Motion was made by Commissioner Junius Johnson and seconded by Commissioner Anthony Simmons to approve January 15, 2026, meeting minutes; All commissioners present voted in favor to approve the meeting minutes as presented.

5. Presentations: None
6. Report of Chief Administrative Officer:

Personnel:

- a. Mr. Lee reminded Commissioners that Statements of Financial Interest are due by May 1, 2026. These forms were distributed at the beginning of the year and are required by the State Board of Ethics. Commissioners were encouraged to complete and submit their forms as soon as possible rather than waiting until the deadline.

Budget:

- a. The Finance Committee received and reviewed the January and February 2026 financial reports, including budget versus actual, budget update overview, banking statements, expense file and supporting documentation.

- b. The Commission submitted an invoice with supporting documentation to the County for the \$250,000 ARP funds allocated in the 2026 budget and received full payment in January. These funds have been deposited into the Commission's account.
- c. Mr. Lee reported that the Commission remains in strong financial condition and is operating within expected budget parameters. Additional details may be provided by the Finance Committee Chair.

Media and Presentations:

During February and March, Mr. Lee participated in several media engagements to promote the Small Business Mini-Grant Initiative, including interviews with:

- Your Erie, The Insider and Erie News Now with Lisa Adams
- Talk 814 with Joel Natalie
- Gannon University WERG Radio with Lee Smith

Additionally, Mr. Lee conducted a Small Business Mini-Grant presentation at a Marquette Savings Bank-Innovation Learning Center on March 6, 2026.

Investment Development:

- a. Contracts for the Generation Impact Opportunity Initiative totaling \$650,000 for four awarded organizations have been received and filed.
- b. A funding release documentation meeting was held on February 17, 2026, to inform grant recipients of required submission materials necessary for disbursement.

Website Development and Branding:

- a. Parker Strategy Group continues to oversee the Commission's social media presence and broader communications strategy. This includes website updates, enhanced outreach efforts, and development of educational and promotional materials.
- b. Commissioners were encouraged to share updates with their networks and invite stakeholders to engage with the Commission via social media and public events.

Other Key Items:

Mr. Gary Lee provided a detailed report of his recent engagements, highlighting the Commission's ongoing outreach, partnerships, and community involvement.

- January 16, 2026, Mr. Lee attended the Knowledge Breakfast, where regional economic updates were presented and discussed.
- On January 21, 2026, Mr. Lee met with Mr. Brandon Mendoza, CEO of the Erie Regional Chamber Growth Partnership, to explore partnership opportunities. He noted that the Commission is currently sponsoring a Diverse Business Scholarship Program in collaboration with the Chamber.

- January 24, 2026, Mr. Lee attended the Martin Luther King Jr. Annual Dinner, which featured Attorney Ben Crump as the keynote speaker. Mr. Lee described the event as highly impactful and well-received.
- January 25, 2026, Mr. Lee attended the Civic and Community Leaders Church Service at Second Baptist Church. During the service, Pastor Darrell Cook shared his vision for the church and its role in the community.
- January 31, 2026, Mr. Lee attended the Sight Center Diabetes Prevention Initiative kickoff event at Full Gospel Calvary Baptist Church. He described the event as impactful and noted that he had the opportunity to speak and highlight the Commission's investment in the initiative.
- February 2, 2026, Mr. Lee participated in a virtual meeting with Khaz Finley is the Assistant Vice President of External Engagement at the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland. He reported that they are collaborating on an initiative planned for April and May, with additional details forthcoming.
- February 5, 2026, Mr. Lee attended the Infinite Erie Breakfast budgeting and briefing session, where updates were provided regarding the Governor's fiscal year 2026–2027 initiatives affecting the Erie region.
- February 10, 2026, Mr. Lee attended the Erie Times-News Editorial Board meeting alongside Commissioners Patterson and Shinsky. During the meeting, they presented and discussed the Commission's vision, mission, and annual report. Mr. Lee noted that it was a valuable opportunity to share the Commission's story and expressed appreciation to both Commissioners for their participation.
- February 12, 2026, Mr. Lee participated in the Gannon University Black Student Union Roundtable discussion with Commissioner Patterson. He described the event as an opportunity to share personal and professional experiences while investing in and mentoring students.
- February 20, 2026, Mr. Lee attended another Knowledge Breakfast, which featured remarks from the County Executive regarding the future of Erie County. He described the discussion as insightful.
- February 23, 2026, Mr. Lee and the Chairman met with representatives from Erie Black Wall Street to discuss potential collaboration on future initiatives. Mr. Lee described the meeting as productive and noted that the organization plans to submit an investment proposal to the Commission for review and feedback.
- February 25, 2026, Mr. Lee and the Chairman met with the County Executive to review the Commission's 2025 Annual Report. Mr. Lee reported that the meeting was successful and that efforts are underway to establish ongoing, regular communication and a strong working relationship with the County Executive and her administration.
- February 26, 2026, Mr. Lee participated in a Black History Month virtual town hall hosted with Representative Merski.

- February 27, 2026, Mr. Lee presented a seminar titled “Abundance vs. Scarcity: The Impact of Inclusive Investment in Erie County” at the Jefferson Educational Society. He reported receiving highly positive feedback and expressed appreciation to Commissioners Patterson and Fyke for their participation.
- February 28, 2026, Mr. Lee attended the Erie Black Wall Street Green Light Dinner, which he described as a well-organized and high-quality event.
- During the month of March 2026, Mr. Lee met with State Senator Dan Laughlin, Representative Pat Harkins, and Representative Bob Merski to review the Commission’s 2025 Annual Report and discuss opportunities for collaboration, including future grant initiatives. Mr. Lee noted that Representative Merski expressed strong support for the Commission’s work and commended its data-driven mission.
- Mr. Lee also reported that efforts are ongoing to schedule or reschedule a meeting with Representative Ryan Bizzarro’s office.
- On March 15, 2026, Mr. Lee attended a Iftar dinner with the Erie Afghan community. He described the event as a meaningful opportunity for fellowship and commended Chairman Taraky and his team for their hospitality and efforts in welcoming attendees.
- Outreach to County Council members remains ongoing, with continued efforts to encourage participation in Commission meetings and individual engagement by Commissioners.

Mr. Lee concluded by expressing appreciation for the Commissioners’ support—especially the Executive Committee—and reaffirmed his guiding principle: “We don’t make excuses, we make adjustments.”

A Motion was made by Commissioner Anthony Simmons and seconded by Commission Vice Chairman William “Bill” Jeffress to approve the report of the Chief Administrative Officer. All commissioners present voted in favor.

7. Reports of Committee Chairpersons

Executive Committee-

- i. Chair Saeed Taraky reported several key updates and activities. He reminded Commissioners to encourage small businesses to submit applications for the Small Business Mini-Grant Initiative before the deadline of tomorrow, noting that previous award recipients are also eligible to apply.
- ii. He said that a productive meeting was held with the County Executive, during which the importance of strengthening a positive and effective working relationship was emphasized. The Commission agreed to establish regular meetings with the County Executive to provide updates on its work and seek continued support.

- iii. Commissioners were also encouraged to actively engage County Council members, community leaders, and civic organizations by sharing information about Commission activities and inviting them to attend board meetings to provide feedback. Members were further invited to identify community events that the Commission could potentially sponsor or support.
- iv. Chair Taraky provided additional updates from recent travel to Harrisburg, including participation in discussions with the Governor regarding immigration enforcement and related policy concerns, as well as attendance at an Iftar dinner hosted at the Governor's residence with Muslim leaders from across the Commonwealth. During that visit, he also met with Akbar Hossain who is currently serving as the Secretary of Policy and Planning for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and discussed the Commission's DEI initiatives, with plans to connect him with Mr. Lee for further collaboration.
- v. He also noted participation in an Afghan community Iftar dinner held during Ramadan, which brought together community members to foster unity and connection. He concluded by extending appreciation to Commissioners who were able to attend and offering to answer any questions.

Finance Committee-

- i. Mr. Lee reported that all items reviewed during the Finance Committee meeting had been provided for the record and invited the Vice Chair to share any additional comments, as this was his first attendance at the committee meeting. Vice Chairman, Bill Jeffress stated that he was highly impressed with the presentation and organization of the financial materials, noting the level of detail provided despite the Commission's small staff and commending the work as being comparable to that of a full finance department. Chair Taraky thanked the Vice Chair for his remarks and appreciation.

Grants Review Committee-

Gary Lee reported that the committee has not yet convened, as it is awaiting the full set of applications for the Small Business Initiative grant program. He noted that all currently available information had already been provided and that no additional updates were necessary at this time.

- i. At the request of Saeed Taraky, Gary Lee provided an update on application activity. He reported that a total of 38 applications had been received to date, consisting of both new applicants and returning businesses. He added that additional submissions are anticipated before the application deadline, as it is typical to see an increase in applications closer to the close of the submission period.
- ii. Gary Lee expressed enthusiasm about the strong response from the small business community, noting that this is the third round of the initiative and one of the most positively received programs. He stated that once all applications are received,

members of the Grants Review Committee will be provided with instructions and materials to begin the review process.

He further indicated that the goal is to complete the review and award process within 60 days, expressing confidence that this timeline will be met.

Strategic Funding Committee-

- i. Chairman Taraky noted that EJ had sent two email communications to commissioners in an effort to coordinate a meeting time; however, no responses had been received. Saeed Taraky acknowledged the busy schedules of commissioners but emphasized the importance of making time to meet.
- ii. He encouraged commissioners to coordinate with Commissioner Fyke to schedule a meeting in order to discuss the formation and promotion of the Strategic Fundraising Committee.

8. Unfinished Business: None

9. New Business: None

10. Adjournment

A motion was made by Commissioner Junius Johnson and seconded by Commission Vice Chairman William "Bill" Jeffress to adjourn the meeting at 6:42 P.M. All commissioners present voted in favor.

Invitees: Vannah