

MINUTES

Erie County Council

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Brian Shank, Chairman
Charlie Bayle
André R. Horton
Ellen Schauerma
Terry M. Scutella
Jim Winarski

SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES

Wednesday, August 9, 2023

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The Pledge of Allegiance was led by Chairman Shank.

ROLL CALL

Members Present: Chair Brian Shank, Charlie Bayle, Andre Horton, Ellen Schauerma, Terry M. Scutella, and Jim Winarski (via Zoom)

Others Present: Megan Moore, Jill Pennsy

HEARING OF THE PUBLIC

No members of the public wished to be heard.

NEW BUSINESS

Interview of Applicants for District 3 Vacancy

Chairman Shank expounded on the selection process, stating that the interviews for the District Three vacancy would be conducted following the sequence of applications received, as approved by Solicitor Talarico.

First candidate Mark Tanenbaum was unable to attend. He gave a statement to Ms. Moore to read on his behalf.

Mr. Tanenbaum conveyed his intention to extend his services as an appointed Erie County Council member, stepping into the position previously held by Mrs. Mary Rennie until the culmination of her term. He emphasized the gravity of participating in a public council, citing his belief in its significance. He noted his belief that all citizens deserved fair and objective representation at all levels of government. He acknowledged his grasp of the council's responsibility in approving budgets and supervising decisions regarding the allocation of funds aimed at benefiting Erie County's residents. He affirmed his capacity to objectively oversee this responsibility, ensuring the faithful execution of the entrusted duties. He pointed out his ongoing role as the Executive Director of the Performing Arts Collective Alliance, highlighting his continuous engagement with the public. Additionally, he mentioned his position as a Board Member of the Historic Review Commission, underlining his familiarity with budget concerns and operations regarding large monetary transactions. He stated he considered himself a moderate who wanted the best for all citizens of Erie County.

John Chimera, Erie: Mr. Chimera, a resident of District Three for twenty-four years, expressed his interest in the candidacy. He conveyed the reasons for submitting his application for the position, citing multiple compelling reasons that he felt were particularly urgent at the time. He emphasized the necessity for a candidate with a fresh perspective on the Council. He articulated his belief that District Three was in need of a representative who was not selected through the traditional networks of influence he noted as the "Good ole boy network". He pointed out a specific instance involving the County Democratic Chairman, who had endorsed a favored candidate for the appointment, highlighting the need for an alternative approach to representation. He accentuated his profound familiarity with the operations of government employees by highlighting his extensive twenty-eight years of combined experience within the Department of Transportation and the Pennsylvania Game Commission. He highlighted his experience as a manager at the General Electric Plants, as a Union Member of Union 506, a retired Fire Chief, and a Millcreek Township Police Department Dispatcher. He highlighted certain key educational achievements, including his Mechanical Engineering Degree, and his extensive experience as a certified EMT for many years. He mentioned his past role as a Committee Man in Millcreek Township's First District, noting that he hadn't engaged with the Erie County Government since then. He asserted his confidence in the transferability of his job skills and articulated his belief in satisfying the prerequisites for the District Three appointment. He respectfully requested the Council's consideration of his application for the appointment.

Mr. Horton encouraged applicants to delve deeper into their personal backgrounds and motivations for seeking the position. He expressed a desire for applicants to elaborate on their individual stories and articulate their reasons for aspiring to be a part of the endeavor.

Mr. Scutella inquired whether Mr. Chimera believed him to be associated with the "good ole boy network."

Mr. Chimera stated he did not believe that to be the case. He recounted his experience of the interview process for the Erie City Council, highlighting that during the interview process, he was one of thirteen applicants. He noted that the individual who secured the position was not present during the interview process, nor were they mentioned. He expressed his belief that this situation was not fair, suggesting that the absence of the eventual appointee during the interview process was a questionable practice. Furthermore, he pointed out that the endorsement of another applicant by the Democratic Party Chairman placed the remaining candidates in a disadvantaged position.

Mr. Horton stated a resolution requesting the Democratic Party to follow a specific procedure had been adopted. He underscored that the purpose of their current session was to evaluate candidates based on their individual qualifications and accomplishments. He expressed that their intention was to facilitate the selection process and provide candidates with a fair opportunity to secure the position.

Mr. Chimera extended an apology to Mr. Horton, but he firmly affirmed that he had been asked about his values and had responded honestly.

Mr. Horton clarified that the question posed was about the reasons for wanting the job, rather than an inquiry into his values. While acknowledging that discussing values was within the scope, he found the insinuation that the Council would align with the "good ole boys" network offensive.

Mr. Chimera extended his apologies again.

Mr. Horton stated he hoped that he hadn't caused any offense, and thanked him for having the courage to stand up for his values.

Larry Sapienza, Erie: Mr. Sapienza, a District Three resident for over four decades, emphasized his extensive experience, having served three terms as Constable and two terms as an appointed Deputy. He further noted his current position as a Board Member of the Erie County Convention Center Authority, where he contributed significantly by participating on various committees, including the Budget Finance Committee and the Human Resources committee. He expressed his profound pride in his successful tenure as a youth baseball coach for the Erie Outlaws Youth Baseball Program. He then elaborated on his current role at the Multicultural Community Resource Center, where he served as a housing coordinator. He noted in this capacity, he dedicated himself to aiding refugee families in their pursuit of housing within the Erie County area. He underscored that his most defining role was that of a father, highlighting the immense pride he felt for his son, John. He articulated his belief that his background was a strong match for the vacant seat. With his experience engaging with individuals from diverse backgrounds, he gained a comprehensive understanding of Erie County's needs. As a Board Member, he stated he wielded influence over crucial economic decisions for the County. He conveyed his aspiration to utilize his experience to contribute to solutions that would benefit Erie County.

Rock Copeland, Erie. Mr. Copeland disclosed that he was nominated as the Democrat to take the spot of Mary Rennie on the ballot. He expressed his profound gratitude for the party's affirmation that they believed he was the best candidate. He highlighted two crucial considerations the council should take into account during their decision-making process. He stated that the first consideration was the reminder that the residents of District Three had effectively lost their representation, underlining the importance of filling the vacant seat to restore their voice. He stated that the second consideration was the potential advantage of selecting a candidate who would also be on the ballot for the upcoming election. He explained that it would allow them the time to establish rapport and collaborate on the budgetary matters that would impact their work over the next four years. He described himself as a dedicated advocate for other candidates, driven by a genuine passion for promoting good governance. He further described his affinity for being a "geek," stating that if there was a Council or Board meeting, he was either in the room or watching it live. He emphasized his sincere care and keen interest in the political process,

fueled by his love for numbers and data. He emphasized the vital role that budgetary numbers played in shaping the desired course for the County's development.

Mr. Bayle asked how long Mr. Copeland was a part of the district.

Mr. Copeland expressed that he had resided within the district for a span of approximately two years, following his relocation from Chicago to Erie County eight years prior. He stated he had previously lived within Mr. Shank's district and that lent him a comprehensive understanding of the area. He underscored the significance of not only advocating for his own district but also extending his representation to other districts as well.

Mr. Scutella inquired of Mr. Copeland whether he perceived himself to be "serving two masters" because of his endorsement by the Democratic Party for the forthcoming election, coupled with him coming forward to fulfill the remainder of Mary Rennie's term.

Mr. Copeland acknowledged the perspective raised but firmly asserted his stance to the contrary. He expressed his genuine desire to exemplify his dedication to service to the governing body. He felt that there should be no difference between serving the body in the present or in the future. He firmly professed his belief in the principles of good governance, underscoring his dedication to upholding these values. He noted his ultimate goal was to ensure the wellbeing of the County of Erie.

Mrs. Schauerman provided Mr. Shank with a note, ensuring that there was clear awareness regarding the compensation, which amounted to approximately 53 cents per hour.

Mr. Shank asked about his contributions to the community beyond what was listed in his resume.

Mr. Copeland shared that he presently held a position within the Sewer Authority, despite the relatively brief duration of his tenure there. He stated that he had immersed himself in party politics for an extended period, advocating for candidates he believed in.

Mr. Shank inquired if he used to serve on the City Council.

Mr. Copeland confirmed his previous involvement with the City Council, and he attributed this experience as a significant factor leading him to that point. He recalled a significant moment when he engaged in a lengthy discussion with Mary Rennie. He revealed that his decision to run for his current role was partially inspired by her suggestion.

Thomas Spagel, Erie: Mr. Spagel expressed his motivation for seeking to serve, driven by his aspiration to create an environment that would encourage his four children to choose to remain there. He indicated that his family and friends

shared the same sentiment. He emphasized that their desire was to cultivate Erie County into an environment that provided an atmosphere in which their children would choose to reside. He acknowledged that his reasoning might appear selfish, but he also highlighted his longstanding involvement with numerous nonprofits for the better of the community. He recounted his extensive past, detailing a twenty-five year military career. He shared that he had acquired valuable lessons in making challenging decisions and being objective during his time there. He also mentioned his prior role on the School Board, a position that brought him considerable satisfaction. He emphasized that during his time there, the board had played a pivotal role in facilitating the education of around 12,000 individuals in Erie. He reiterated his strong advocacy for education, highlighting the importance of continued effort in that area. He detailed his educational background, noting that he held an MBA, and mentioned his experience managing his own business. He explained his comfort with budgeting processes, drawing from his hands-on experience with his business budget. He expressed a keen awareness of the challenges associated with budget deficits, referencing a substantial \$24 million deficit that the School Board faced during his tenure. He recounted a time when financial constraints led to difficulties in compensating teachers, a situation that had a direct impact on the most significant stakeholders in the educational system: the children. He stated that they had to have some civility within the Council. He described himself as an amicable type of guy who was amenable to people's perspectives. He acknowledged his affiliation as a registered Democrat, but felt he upheld absolute objectivity.

Julie Schmitt, Erie: Ms. Schmitt described a lifetime dedicated to the service industry, detailing her diverse roles as a host, a bartender, a barista, and more. She passionately described how her interactions with countless individuals from all walks of life granted her a unique insight into the essence of the city she held dear. She acknowledged that her qualifications did not mirror those of the other candidates but underlined the significance of having female representation on the Council. Julie humbly expressed her aspiration for the council to grant her the opportunity to share her intimate knowledge of Erie, allowing them to experience the city as she had.

Mr. Shank inquired if she had any affiliation with organizations or committees.

Ms. Schmitt candidly revealed that she had refrained from engaging with organizations due to challenges with her mental well-being. She shared that she had only recently reached a point where she felt prepared to step into that realm.

Mr. Shank inquired if his colleagues had anything else to say.

Mrs. Schauerman wanted the candidates to know that she had gone through the application process without any preconceived notions or biases. She emphasized that she examined their resumes independently and carefully chose the most qualified individuals based on their credentials.

Mr. Shank thanked the candidates for submitting their applications and commended them for their courage.

Mr. Horton mentioned that in the past, the Democratic Party would nominate a candidate for the Council spot, and then the Council members would proceed with a voting process. He highlighted their commitment to transparency in the current process. He expressed gratitude to the Chairman for the graceful manner in which he managed the process.

The Council members reached a unanimous decision to select three candidates for further discussion and voting.

Mr. Shank announced that he was open to receiving nominations from the council for three candidate names.

Mr. Bayle conveyed his view that the individuals who best met the qualifications were Mr. Copeland, Mr. Spagel, and Mr. Sapienza.

Mrs. Schauerman announced her selection of Mr. Chimera, Mr. Copeland, and Mr. Spagel as her preferred candidates.

Mr. Scutella specified his trio of choices as Mr. Copeland, Mr. Chimera, and Ms. Schmitt.

Mr. Horton indicated that his selections for candidates were Mr. Copeland, Mr. Spagel, and Mr. Chimera.

Mr. Shank highlighted that his chosen candidates included Mr. Spagel, Mr. Sapienza, and Mr. Chimera.

Mr. Winarski expressed his decision to opt for Mr. Sapienza, Mr. Copeland, and Mr. Spagel as his selections.

Mr. Horton expressed his desire to substitute Mr. Chimera with Mr. Tanenbaum due to an oversight, acknowledging Mr. Tanenbaum's merits as a candidate. He highlighted his appreciation for the impressive work Mr. Tanenbaum had accomplished.

Ms. Moore announced that the candidates with the highest number of votes were Rock Copeland, Thomas Spagel, and Larry Sapienza.

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting adjourned on a motion from Councilman Horton.

***The next Regular Meeting of
County Council is Tuesday, August
15, 2023 at 6pm in room 117, Erie
County Courthouse or streamed
live at the link provided on the
County website.**

***Members of the public wishing to speak at an upcoming Regular Meeting of Council or those requiring specific accommodation are encouraged to call or email the Council Office at (814) 451-6303 or Councilrequests@eriecountypa.gov, no later than the end of business 5 days prior to the meeting. The public must be present at the meeting to speak.**