

MINUTES

Erie County Council

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Charlie Bayle
André R. Horton
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Tom Spagel
Jim Winarski

PUBLIC BUDGET HEARING MINUTES

Thursday, November 2, 2023

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Chairman Shank led the Pledge of Allegiance.

ROLL CALL

Members Present: Chair Brian Shank, Vice Chair Terry Scutella, Charlie Bayle, Ellen Schauerman, and Jim Winarski (via zoom)
Others Present: Karen Chillcott, Megan Moore

HEARING OF THE PUBLIC

Chairman Shank explained that each speaker would have three minutes to speak.

Speakers (time to be determined by Chair of County Council)

Danny Jones: Mr. Jones, CEO of GECAC, addressed the Council members regarding the potential impact of proposed budget cuts on community services. He emphasized the importance of their understanding of the implications and urged them to address any concerns. He expressed a commitment to keeping his remarks brief and deferred to those directly affected by the cuts.

Matthew Trott, Millcreek: Mr. Trott shared his experience directing the Erie County Area Agency on Aging since 2015. He highlighted significant changes over the past eight years, noting the increasing demand for services as the elderly population continued to grow. He expressed concern about the proposed budget cuts affecting the agency's ability to serve the expanding demographic. He urged the Council to consider the long-term consequences, emphasizing the critical role of the Area Agency on Aging in providing various services for older adults. He noted that the services included funding for local community centers, congregate meals, home care services, and volunteerism programs. He stressed the importance of the funds that were used to support essential services like home-delivered Meals on Wheels, personal care, and volunteer programs benefiting numerous nonprofits and institutions throughout Erie County. He highlighted the significance of older adult Protective Services in investigating abuse, neglect, and exploitation. He explained that while county funds may not directly support the program, having sufficient funds for other services allows for the expansion of older adult Protective Services crisis response.

Beth Terp: Ms. Terp expressed gratitude to the Council for allowing her to

speak on behalf of the adult education program at GECAC, where she has served as the program manager since 2021. She highlighted the impact of Erie County funding on the program, emphasizing its significance for students seeking GED testing. As the only GED Testing Center in Erie County, she noted that approximately \$25,000 from the budget was allocated to the testing aspect. She shared a recent collaboration with the Erie County Prison, addressing the need for GED testing among incarcerated individuals. She noted that despite a five-month process, the program successfully established a mobile testing site, resulting in the graduation of six individuals in August and September, with more scheduled for testing in November. She underscored the positive impact on these individuals' reintegration into society, reducing resistance, improving job prospects, and decreasing the likelihood of reverting to previous activities. She discussed the allocation of funds to educators for program delivery throughout Erie County. She mentioned ongoing efforts to invest in new computers for the GED lab, ensuring compliance and expanding testing services for community members. She reiterated the transformative impact of Erie County funds on the program, emphasizing that every dollar is dedicated to the students and serves as a catalyst for seeking additional funding to expand programs throughout Erie County.

Marybelle Martin: Ms. Martin identified herself as the manager of the Education, Workforce, and Self-Efficiency Division at GECAC, overseeing the Adult Education Basic Literacy Program. She expressed gratitude for the opportunity to speak and emphasized the unique services offered by GECAC's Adult Basic Literacy and Education program. She highlighted the program's ability to reach family members and friends of current consumers due to the range of services provided across divisions. She emphasized the program's capacity to serve immigrant and refugee populations, contributing to literacy and improved positions within the community. She underscored that GECAC had the only licensed GED testing site in Erie County, enabling partnerships with other agencies to facilitate GED testing for individuals in various programs. She emphasized the importance of forming partnerships with agencies like Mercy Center for Women, Erie County Community College, and WQLN, extending their reach beyond Erie City into boroughs and townships of Erie County. She illustrated the program's success, including a dyslexic student joining the military, a single mother advancing to management after obtaining her GED, and an engineer from Iraq finding employment opportunities and actively contributing to the community. She stressed that the funds allocated to GECAC were not restricted to the organization but were utilized to benefit all aspects of Erie County. She presented documents outlining the contributions of GED programs to communities and potential problems if such programs were cut.

Gina Scribner, Erie: Ms. Scribner, the Executive Director of the Mercy Hilltop Senior Center, briefly addressed the Council, urging thoughtful consideration of any potential cuts that could impact seniors. She emphasized the misconception about senior centers primarily being spaces for recreational activities, highlighting the deeper, higher-level services provided. She shared insights from her daily work, emphasizing the significance of services for seniors. She

explained that the center, funded through grants from GECAC, employed a part-time nurse and social worker who had uncovered issues such as food insecurity among middle-class attendees. She stated that they had been instrumental in redirecting individuals, reducing emergency room visits, and demonstrating cost savings in healthcare through programs like diabetes prevention and fall reduction. She emphasized that the investment in services for seniors was an investment in the entire community, and she urged the Council to consider that when passing the budget.

Art Leopold, Millcreek: Mr. Leopold acknowledged the challenging task of budgeting, recognizing the limited resources available for numerous needs. He highlighted the difficulty of decision-making and expressed appreciation for the Council's efforts. He mentioned the importance of transparency in the budgeting process, suggesting the provision of an executive summary that outlines reductions, increases, and areas needing more funding. He expressed hope for a resolution to any previous controversies, emphasizing the need to avoid repeating errors from past budgets. He commended the Council for their dedication to the task and expressed anticipation for their debates and eventual decisions.

Mary Rennie, Erie: Mrs. Rennie acknowledged the Council's challenging task and addressed specific points within the Department of Economic Development's budget. She focused on the 04210 line, highlighting a \$70,000 increase in fees and expressing concern about the lack of contracted revenue. She suggested maintaining the \$10,000 marker unless there were confirmed contracts, emphasizing prudent budgeting. She drew attention to the 09969 line, noting a transfer from Gaming and the overdrawn Gaming Revenue. She recommended increasing the transfer from the General Fund by \$195,000, creating a cleaner process to avoid transferring funds back and forth between budgets. She raised concerns about the Gaming Revenue fund balance appropriation of \$2,796,841, emphasizing the need to adhere to dedicated fund purposes. She urged caution against playing "fast and loose" with funds. Regarding AFSME contracts, she sought confirmation that the numbers, possibly exceeding a million dollars, had been calculated and included in the deliberations. She addressed the budget's reliance on a \$1.7 million draw from the fund balance and cautioned against a tax increase, suggesting that if a draw occurred, the County Executive or Council should identify non-recurring expenses in compliance with established county legislation.

The budget is available for examination in the County Council Office, room 114 of the Erie County Courthouse. It is also available at <https://eriecountypa.gov/departments/county-council/> or <https://eriecountypa.gov/departments/finance/reports/> or you may call 814-451-6303 for help.

ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Scutella made a motion to adjourn the meeting.

The next Public Budget Hearing will be Tuesday November 14th, 2023 at 2:00 p.m. in Council Chambers, Room 117.

Erie County Council will hold a work session for the budget on Saturday November 4. The public is invited to attend via

Zoom , <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89314067645?pwd=MVVYdVY3WXpVVUJZV0JqL2dPdRVQT09>

Meeting ID: 893 1406 7645

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