

MINUTES

Erie County Council

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PUBLIC BUDGET HEARING MEETING MINUTES

Tuesday, November 14, 2023

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Chairman Shank led the Pledge of Allegiance.

ROLL CALL

Members Present: Chair Brian Shank, Vice Chair Terry Scutella, Andre Horton, Charlie Bayle, Ellen Schauerma
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)

Art Leopold, Millcreek: Mr. Leopold sought to enter the name Yusef Salaam into the record. He highlighted that Salaam, a convicted criminal, was exonerated in the Central Park Five case and now a member of the New York City Council. He used that example to emphasize the power elections to bring about change. He noted recent electoral successes for women in Ohio and the VA Legislature, attributing those victories to people using their voices through voting. He pointed out the importance of elected officials not only seeking votes during elections but also actively listening to the voices of the people. Drawing inspiration from fellow community members Johnny Johnson and Pastor Mock, he highlighted the significance of elected officials understanding and responding to the voices of the people. He encouraged the Council to consider issues brought forth by Councilman Horton related to the DEI Commission and evaluate the allocation of ECGRA funds, emphasizing that those funds supported valuable community assets. He implored the Council to listen to the people and to recognize the connection between their votes and the voices of the community.

Mary Rennie, Erie: Mrs. Rennie addressed her concerns regarding the budget process. She highlighted her focus on the integrity of the budget and the information available for informed decision-making by the Council. She pointed out that, to her knowledge, FMS access was still not accessible to Council members, limiting their ability to gather necessary information. She emphasized the reduced information in the current budget compared to previous ones, noting a decrease in columns from 17 to 9. She noted that the reduction affected the availability of annualized information and projections, critical for understanding

past expenditures and predicting future spending. She raised concerns about the non-bargaining pay plan, suggesting that the numbers appear to be in the budget already, prompting the council to scrutinize this aspect. She expressed concerns about veto issues, stating that certain positions in the budget could potentially negate a lawsuit if put forward for a vote. Regarding real estate revenue projections, she doubted their realism and suggested seeking input from knowledgeable individuals outside the administration to ensure accuracy. She stressed the need for an itemized sheet detailing added positions throughout the year, particularly as personnel costs constituted a significant portion of the budget. She refuted claims in the introductory sheet about healthcare premiums in Pleasant Ridge Manor, stating that they had not changed over the previous year.

Marybelle Martin, Millcreek: Ms. Martin, the Executive Director and Division Manager at GECAC, discussed the Adult Education Basic Literacy program, specifically focusing on the GED classes. She emphasized the dynamic nature of the program, which constantly enrolled new students, and sought to provide services for the entire county of Erie. She highlighted the community-innovative approach of the program, offering adult education classes both online and in-person at various locations, including GECAC and the Mercy Center for Women. She noted that the classes were scheduled during the daytime and evening, with digital literacy options for those unable to attend in person. She explained the challenges faced by adult educational students preparing for the GED test, which consisted of four components: reasoning through language arts, social studies, math, and science. She commended the dedication, hard work, and sometimes frustration of both students and teachers in the program. She provided statistics on the program's main testing site, where 92 people had taken at least one test, and 48 individuals had earned their GED. She shared data from the Erie County Prison site, where six individuals were tested, with four already earning their GED. She stated that in total, 90 individuals had taken at least one subject test, and 52 had earned their GEDs, with a total of 309 subject tests given. She acknowledged the impact of county funding, expressing gratitude for the opportunities it provided to people in Erie County who were unable to complete high school. She emphasized that the program had used the allocated funds to make a significant positive impact on the community.

Jennie Hagerty, Fairview: Ms. Hagerty, the Executive Director for the Mercy Center for Women, expressed her gratitude for the partnership with GECAC and the positive impact it had on individuals served by the Mercy Center and the broader community. She highlighted the opening of the Mercy Anchor Community Center in March 2023, which allowed them to start education and digital literacy programs for eight individuals. She shared a quote from a former client, emphasizing the importance of GED classes in boosting confidence and self-esteem. She stressed the critical importance of funding for these programs and advocated for continued support. She acknowledged that raising funds personally could be challenging, especially when their primary concern was housing homelessness. She expressed her gratitude for the transformative impact of GECAC's programming on graduates and the future of the community, and

thanked the Council for their support.

Sam Talarico, Erie: Mr. Talarico expressed concerns about the county's financial situation. He mentioned a \$3.1 million fund deficit and criticized decisions, such as giving \$5 million without having the revenue and offering a "sweetheart deal" to Gannon University. He raised concerns about a half-million-dollar allocation for Economic Development, questioning its effectiveness. He urged the Council to eliminate unreasonable spending and stand up against the County Executive's actions for the sake of the community.

Beth Terp, Erie: Ms. Terp expressed gratitude for the opportunity to speak on behalf of GECAC's Adult Education Program and GED Testing Centers. While acknowledging the importance of the GED credential, she emphasized that it translated to a significant increase in income for individuals, amounting to \$9,000 more per year, with the potential for higher figures considering pre-COVID conditions and inflation. She highlighted the broader impact of GECAC's services, including English language support for immigrants. She noted calls from organizations like the International Institute, Catholic Charities, and IU5 seeking assistance for services. She emphasized that Erie's role as a vital city for immigrants had allowed GECAC to play a crucial part in serving that population. She expressed joy in contributing to the success of individuals pursuing the American dream, overcoming challenging situations, and giving back to the community. She emphasized the cyclical nature of the process, where the success of individuals feeds back into the community and contributes to tax funding, allowing for the growth of services. She stressed the importance of stopgap services and highlighted the role GECAC played in helping individuals, including high school graduates, practice and improve their skills. She declared that it was particularly crucial in addressing skill deficits resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and helping adults better support their children's education for a more prosperous future.

Danny Jones, Erie: Mr. Jones read a letter from one of his partners. The letter highlighted the challenges faced by Erie High School in terms of overall test scores and proficiency rates in math and reading, emphasizing the impact on the community, as dropouts were more likely to face unemployment, poor health, poverty, and reliance on public assistance. The letter underscored the importance of GECAC's Adult Basic and Literacy Education Program, noting that a GED could provide individuals with essential life skills, open up job opportunities, and improve their overall quality of life. The program was recognized for its role in providing a testing site in Erie, addressing transportation barriers for individuals seeking to complete the necessary testing. The author advocated for increased funding for the ABLE program, highlighting the discrepancy between the average pay for GED instructors in Pennsylvania and the compensation received by GECAC staff. The program manager, with additional responsibilities, was acknowledged for juggling various roles. The letter suggested that with adequate funding, the possibilities for the ABLE program would be endless. It envisioned the addition of a career coordinator who could guide students through various options after obtaining their GED,

assist with job applications, identifying educational opportunities, and explore different career paths. The letter expressed appreciation for the council's time and urged continued support for programs like ABLE, emphasizing their life-changing impact on the Erie community.

Matthew Trott, Millcreek: Mr. Trott, the director of the Area Agency on Aging at GECAC, emphasized the increasing older adult population and the need to reframe perceptions about their contribution to the community. He highlighted the reframing aging initiative, aiming to highlight how older adults were more a part of the solution than a drain on resources. He connected the funding from Erie County to programs that enhance opportunities for older adults, enabling them to actively participate in the community. He specifically mentioned the impact on volunteer programs, such as the Retired Senior Volunteer Program, which delivered home-delivered meals and engaged older adults in various community activities. Acknowledging the challenges of a difficult budget, he emphasized that the programs at GECAC's Area Agency on Aging ultimately saved taxpayer dollars. He pointed out that the accountability of their programs was recognized by federal and state authorities, and quarterly reports were submitted to the finance department and administration. He noted that those reports detailed the volunteer hours and in-home services funded by the county, illustrating the positive outcomes that contributed to cost savings, particularly in keeping older adults out of higher-cost facilities like nursing homes. He expressed gratitude for the ongoing support and awareness from the Council.

Freda Tepfer, Erie: Ms. Tepfer, holding a master's degree in adult education, underscored the importance of adult education, particularly for those pursuing GEDs and preparing for success in college. In response to the executive's letter emphasizing the importance of delivering mandated services effectively; she questioned the allocation of \$819,000 for economic development, stating that economic development was not a mandated service. She expressed concern over the continuous increase in salaries across various positions, highlighting the salary hike for the public information officer. She urged the Council to reconsider cutting grants to organizations, emphasizing the positive impact those organizations had on the community. Specifically, she mentioned the Booker T. Washington Center, the MLK Center, the IU, and the Urban Economic Community Development Organization, expressing disappointment at the decision to slash their funding. She criticized the allocation of funds to overinflated salaries in administrative departments. She pointed out the substantial increase in the budget for the administration office, questioning the rationale behind such a budget expansion. She suggested a reconsideration of the economic development department funding, asserting that there were more effective ways to perform that function and emphasizing that an EMS utility did not belong at the county level.

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.

Mr. Horton expressed his sentiments, acknowledging the numerous questions raised and the mention of action sheets during the meeting. He clarified that he had not been actively involved in the budget discussions over the past 30 days and had yet to meet the new accountant. Anticipating the upcoming budget meeting on Saturday, he indicated that he might propose action sheets. He emphasized that those proposals would likely involve adjustments within the existing budget rather than additions. He suggested that some of those action sheets might aim to restore funding in certain areas. He conveyed that given the current state of the budget, it appeared challenging, and he agreed with the sentiments shared during the meeting about insufficient information provided. He highlighted his intention to thoroughly assess the budget during the upcoming meeting and decide whether it is appropriate to make additions or adjustments. He expressed his commitment to addressing the budget concerns in a thoughtful manner.

ADJOURNMENT

A motion to adjourn the meeting was made by Mr. Horton.

A Council Budget Work Session will be held on Saturday November 18 at 9:00am. The public is invited to attend via Zoom.

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89557690630?pwd=MFZkQWF3YkFZVkcNYcTdcHpTVVRuUT09>

Meeting ID: 895 5769 0630

Passcode: 111823

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The Finance and Personnel Committees will meet on Thursday November 16 at 4:00pm. in Room 114A of the Erie County Courthouse or via Zoom.

The Budget Meeting of the County Council is Tuesday November 28 at TBD or streamed live at <https://www.youtube.com/c/eriecountypa>. Members of the public wishing to speak at the upcoming Budget Meeting of County Council or those requiring specific accommodation are encouraged to call or email the council Office at (814) 451-6303 or Council requests@eriecountypa.gov no later than Tuesday November 21 at 4:30pm. The public must be present at the meeting to speak.