



E·C·G·R·A
ERIE COUNTY GAMING REVENUE AUTHORITY

**EXECUTIVE
DIRECTOR'S
REPORT
FOR
APRIL
2024**

March 2024

Meeting with Executive Director

Ongoing Social Media Management

Ongoing Consulting

March Comms

IMPLEMENTED

20 Total March posts

19 Total graphics created

Strategic Marketing Planning with Kate Philips and Executive Director

IN PROGRESS | 2024 Grant Releases and Graphics

ARPA report

2023–2024 Annual Report

Lead Assets

Grant recipient graphics

Press release and distribution

Holiday Graphics

Economic Impact Report rollout

Press release

PowerPoint presentation

Social media graphics

IN PLANNING

Parks Fields & Trails 2 year report

ECGRA Playbook

Roadshow Tours

MEMORANDUM

TO: Dale Barney
Chairman of the Board
Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority

FROM: Kelly Hess
ECGRA Board Director

DATE: March 21, 2024

RE: Conflict of Interest Disclosure

On this date, the Board of Directors of the Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority was presented with Resolution Number 5, 2024, which is a Resolution to fund Special Event Grants.. One such entity is Harborcreek Community Engagement Team.

I serve as an officer of the Harborcreek Community Engagement Team. As such, I have abstained from any deliberation or involvement in the process to determine whether to recommend an award to the Harborcreek Community Engagement Team, and I abstain from the deliberation, and vote, regarding the approval of the Resolution. Further, I announced my conflict during the meeting and request that this memo be made part of the minutes of the March 21, 2024 meeting of the ECGRA Board of Directors.



Bridgeway Launches Accelerator in Erie Under Its Building Inclusive Development (BID) Program

The free business-building program will help emerging contracting businesses who have experienced barriers in accessing opportunities to bid on and secure real estate development projects.

As a social impact lender, Bridgeway has a long track record of helping clients acquire and renovate properties. Out of that experience, Bridgeway launched the Building Inclusive Development (BID) program to maximize impact in real estate development and set more

clients up for success. Following a launch in Pittsburgh, BID is offering emerging contractors a business-building program, the [Emerging Contractor Accelerator Erie](#).



"We used Bridgeway's experience in real estate development and worked with industry experts to design accelerator programs and supportive services specific to the needs of emerging contractors to take their business to new levels of profitability and success."

Roderick Ramsey III, BID Program Leader

Program Basics

Bridgeway is currently accepting applications and will enroll up to seven participants for this six-month accelerator. The selected participants will join a cohort of peers to participate in free education sessions led by industry experts and one-on-one coaching with business consultants to maximize opportunities and impact.

The [Emerging Contractor Accelerator Erie](#) focuses on teaching contractors who have experienced barriers to access opportunities how to identify, bid win, and manage large-scale construction projects.

What are the benefits?

- Six months of intensive sessions
- Three months of post-graduation support
- Access to mentoring to activate learning and pursue projects
- Cohort-driven with five participants in a peer group
- Participants get 40 hours of training and coaching
- \$2,000 service stipend for coaching and consulting services during sessions

- \$2,000 service stipend for coaching and consulting services after graduation

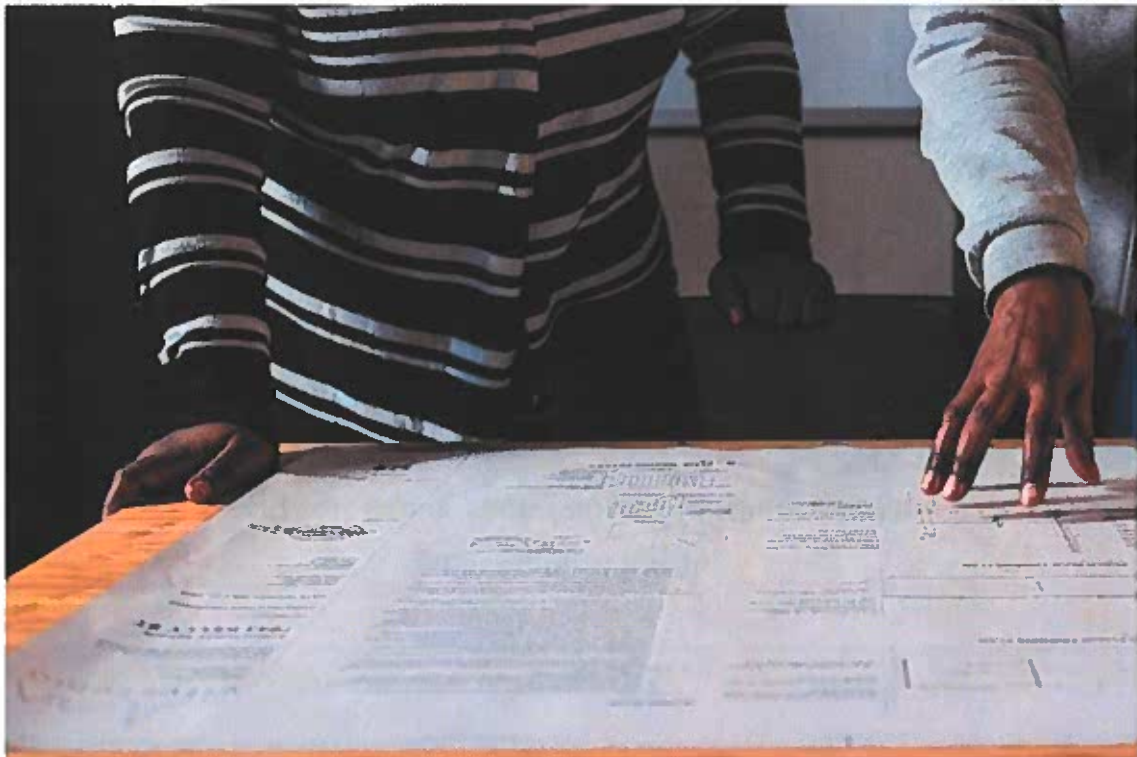
Who may be a good fit?

Applicants for the Emerging Contractor Accelerator should have annual gross revenue of under \$250,000 and average construction contracts below \$100,000, and their businesses should have been established before 2022.

Applicants would be a good fit for this program if they have experienced. barriers to economic growth, identify as socially or economically disadvantaged, or have experienced systematic injustices.

Participants should also be willing to complete program assessments, coursework, and attend both virtual and in-person sessions.

Learn more and apply.



Emerging Contractor Accelerator

ERIE

Learn how to identify, secure, and manage large-scale construction projects that take participants to higher levels of profitability and success.

Now accepting applications

March 15th - April 26th!

[LEARN MORE](#)

Information Session



**2024 Emerging Contractor Accelerator Erie
Information Session**

The Booker T. Washington Center located at 1720 Holland Street, Erie PA on
Wednesday, April 10, from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m.

SIGN UP

For more information and for those interested in registering for the info sessions and
applying to the programs, visit bridgewaycapital.org/BID.



BRIDGEWAY CAPITAL

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LOCAL

'A humanitarian need:' Erie City Council study session starts public bathrooms discussion

A task force of various community representatives could be created soon to lead efforts to create more public restrooms in the city, which would help the homeless and other vulnerable populations.



Kevin Flowers

Erie Times-News

Published 10:13 a.m. ET March 8, 2024 | Updated 10:14 a.m. ET March 8, 2024

The community conversation about the city of Erie's lack of public restrooms is underway.

Erie City Councilwoman Kathy Schaaf's push to create several public restrooms in the city, to aid the homeless and other vulnerable populations, was the subject of a public study session on Thursday night at Erie City Hall.

Schaaf and other members of Erie City Council hosted a study session on the issue in the Bagnoni Council Chambers.

Erie Mayor Joe Schember and representatives of various local nonprofit organizations, such as the Erie Downtown Partnership and the Sisters of St. Joseph Neighborhood Network, were among those who attended.

The hour-long meeting, which Schaaf referred to as an informal "work session," took place in the wake of City Council's unanimous Jan. 17 passage

of a Schaaf-sponsored resolution that pledged to create “a collaborative group of interested parties” to study the issue and determine the best way to create public restrooms in the city.

A task force of various community representatives could be created soon to lead the effort.

Schaaf’s resolution stated that “the city has no 24/7 public restroom facilities at this time.” She intends to lead public meetings that explore the cost/feasibility of creating accessible public restrooms within city limits.

Schaaf has said she wants a collaborative, compassionate and productive conversation that includes local elected officials, business leaders, social service agencies and others.

Without solutions, Schaaf said, the city will continue to see public urination and defecation from the homeless community and others who have no alternative.

The New York Times reported in March that public restrooms have disappeared from many cities as municipal budgets have tightened. As a result, cities across the U.S. are exploring or have explored ways to create more public bathrooms.

Public bathroom access

At the start of Thursday’s study session, Barbara Lewis, a local registered nurse who works with the region’s homeless population, read a written statement on behalf of a formerly homeless woman, “Kelly,” who was unable to attend.

Kelly wrote that when she was homeless, “it was so difficult to access public restrooms as the options were and still are extremely limited.”

After reading Kelly's statement, Lewis suggested that Schaaf and others reach out to officials at the Upper Room daytime homeless shelter, located on the second floor of St. Paul's United Church of Christ, 1024 Peach St., regarding the issue.

Later in the meeting, Schaaf shared photographs of several public restrooms created in other locations, including various cities in Ontario, Canada and Portland, Oregon.

Local officials still have to determine how public restrooms would be maintained and monitored, as well as how such facilities would be paid for.

Researching solutions

Dave Tamulonis, events and marketing manager at the Erie Downtown Partnership, said the organization has been researching the best way to create public restrooms in downtown Erie "for a while now," and that the organization plans to use a \$50,000 grant from the Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority to help create public bathroom facilities.

"We very much agree that this is a humanitarian need," Tamulonis said. "Other cities clearly have figured out solutions for this."

Former City Councilwoman Susannah Faulkner, the director of development at the Sisters of St. Joseph Neighborhood Network, urged officials to consider public restrooms in other areas of the city, such as Erie's Little Italy neighborhood along West 18th Street.

That area lacks public bathroom access as well, Faulkner said.

Faulkner also suggested that local government and various nonprofits/agencies work together to submit joint applications for public grant funding that could be used to create public bathrooms.

Schaaf said there was “good, positive feedback” at Thursday’s meeting, and additional sessions will be scheduled.

“We’re going to reach out to businesses and other stakeholders in our community... And schedule follow-ups,” Schaaf said.

Contact Kevin Flowers at kflowers@timesnews.com. Follow him on X at [@ETNflowers](https://twitter.com/ETNflowers).

Tuesday, March 12, 2024

UC Borough addresses street safety, grant funding

BY MARYANN MOOK
Correspondent

Student safety at a street crossing and Renaissance Grant funding were two of several topics on the table at the March 4 meeting of Union City Borough Council.

Borough Manager Cindy Wells reported that Union City Area School District Superintendent Matthew Bennett has safety concerns about students crossing South Main Street near Odell and Johnson streets.

Wells said several other officials are aware of the

concerns, including Erie County Executive Brenton Davis, state Rep. Jake Banta, (R-4th), Brian Smith of PennDOT and Pennsylvania State Police.

Following discussion, Council gave Wells permission to apply for a grant on behalf of the school district. The grant would help fund a comprehensive study exploring options for enhanced student safety.

Borough Solicitor Tim Wachter advised Council they could agree to apply for the grant on behalf of the district, but Council should enter into an Inter-

governmental Agreement in which the district would agree to pay costs not covered by the grant, since the borough has not budgeted money for costs related to the issue.

In other news, Council approved applications for Renaissance Grant Funds.

"We had seven applications and all were approved," Wells said.

The applications total \$28,800, leaving a balance of about \$43,600 in funding from Round 2 of the funding.

◀ See Street, P.2

Street

(Continued from front page)

"The application process will reopen by the end of the month," Wells said.

Renaissance Grant funds are provided through the Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority (ECGRA). The purpose of the Renaissance Grant Program is to remove housing blight, reverse deterioration, incentivize and spur private investment, make neighborhoods and

communities more attractive, increase the market value of homes and improve the municipal tax base.

In another matter, at the recommendation of Mayor Bob Wolf, Council approved the installation of a prescription drop-off box inside the City Building. It will be located near the Union City Police Department. The drop-off box would be for expired, unwanted and unused medications, but not needles.

Wells does not have a date when the box would be installed.

How do residents describe ECGRA? Accountable, apolitical, accessible, effective

Erie Times-News

Published 4:00 a.m. ET March 22, 2024 | Updated 6:12 a.m. ET March 22, 2024

Erie County residents lined up to express their support of the Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority at two recent meetings — the Feb. 13 Erie County Council meeting and the ECGRA board meeting on Feb. 15. They represented grassroots neighborhood organizations; leaders of small Erie municipalities who are laboring to restore their Main Streets and support small business development; Erie police; local universities; arts and cultural organizations; events organizers; and social service providers.

Their testimonies came as Erie County Executive Brenton Davis in January raised the prospect of ECGRA's dissolution, with the authority's gaming revenues placed under the control of county political leaders. Davis questioned ECGRA's leadership and its operating costs and, as A.J. Rao has reported, made public accusations, without evidence, that ECGRA has been a "slush fund of walking-around money" and an enabler of predatory lending. He requested an exhaustive list of financial information from the board. In response to questions he raised, he and several local lawmakers sent a letter on Republican state Sen. Dan Laughlin's letterhead, requesting that ECGRA, which is audited annually, be audited by state Auditor General Tim DeFoor. DeFoor has indicated he will conduct an audit, as Rao reported. ECGRA Board Chairman Dale Barney told Rao that ECGRA will fully cooperate with the audit and that the authority has "nothing to hide."

At the ECGRA board meeting, where people from across the county shared their experiences with ECGRA, Davis did not renew his remarks about dissolving ECGRA. As Rao reported, he blamed the media for creating a "frenzy" around his scrutiny. He said he wanted to look "under the hood" in pursuit of accountability.

Many who shared their experiences with ECGRA spoke from prepared statements or submitted comments via email. Here is a sampling of the perspectives shared:

Patrick Gehrlein: ECGRA represents what is possible for Erie Co.

Good evening. I am Patrick Gehrlein, of Fairview, Pennsylvania, but I'm also here representing North East Borough. I'm currently the borough manager for North East and what I'd like to discuss this evening is the impact of ECGRA on our community. We can go line by line and discuss the dollar for dollar matches that we've seen, the true gains in our community that those funding dollars from ECGRA have provided.

Let's talk about government efficiency. Something that I'm very passionate about in my own government is the efficiency with which we operate. ECGRA is nonpolitical, apolitical. The leadership that was shown by County Council in years past to promote ECGRA, to continue to support ECGRA has allowed ECGRA to go into our communities, and to borrow a line from the Disney movie "Frozen Two," "Do the next right thing." Every time, every time they come in to discuss something with us, it's not about "Hey, you're going to do a favor for me, so I'm going to do a favor for you." It's not back-scratching. It's do the next right thing in our community. You've heard from arts groups. You've heard from cultural agencies, places doing farms, economic development, (and) community development. You've heard from folks discussing how those dollars impact them, how those dollars increase in value.

Tonight, we heard from the Honorable Mayor Savocchio. And we also have as member of our staff for Erie County government, former Erie Mayor Joe Sinnott. They have both sat here and as well as the members of this board, they have seen study after study asking how do we get Erie back? How can we see that recovery? ECGRA is on the ground doing it. You don't need to reinvent the wheel. They're doing it right now. Those sparks that they put in the community are the things that light up Erie County. They collaborate.

So when we're talking about Our West Bayfront and what they're doing, we in North East are looking at Our West Bayfront, and we're collaborating on what can be done to change. We have more similarities than we have dissimilarities. Blight is blight. Issues with housing are issues with housing. People being out of work are people being out of work, no matter where you live geographically. You all sit up here and represent us in this room. ECGRA represents what is possible for Erie County. They are the spark in our area that we need to support and continue to support.

And I'll end with this. They're always the first ones in with funding. And working in government for over 20 years, first-in funding is almost impossible to find. You know, that's the group that believes in you, that's working with you. Please support ECGRA. Please

continue to show the leadership that you have in the past for ECGRA and moving forward, because the Erie County relies on it. Thank you.

Patrick Gehrlein, North East Borough manager

Impact Corry: ECGRA is apolitical and guided by expertise

Good evening and thank you for allowing me to have the opportunity to speak tonight.

My name is Seth Trott. I'm an Erie resident and attorney, and I'd like to say a few words in support of ECGRA on behalf of a rural community development organization (Impact Corry) for which I'm the treasurer of the board of directors. Our organization would not be nearly as successful as we've been without ECGRA's support and the county government's support of ECGRA.

Clearly, ECGRA is a great thing. It (recently) distributed \$1.6 million dollars to 19 different organizations that are helping all types of people across Erie County in all types of ways.

If we were to disband ECGRA and place its share of the gaming funds under Erie County government control, we would lose the apolitical investment expertise that ECGRA was specifically designed to foster. This would result in these funds going to projects that may not be the most impactful, or even worse, to projects that are chosen solely for political gain. But most importantly, disbanding ECGRA would prevent long-term development projects from being continually funded until those projects are completed.

Many transformative community projects might take five, 10, or even 20 years of work before they're successful. That's why redevelopment is all about persistence and playing the long game. But the county government and governments, in general are often short-term: Elected officials are replaced or term-out; county government staff turns over; and priorities change. When this happens, a 10-year initiative might see its funding cut after being in place for only two years because incoming county officials decided to direct the money somewhere else. So, the initiative fails, the money it already received is wasted, and Erie residents never reap the rewards they were promised had that initiative been consistently funded for those 10 years.

For example, consider a program aimed at improving the facades of homes in a specific portion of Corry or Lake City. If 100 homes improve their facades, property values in that area will rise. But you can't fund 100 homes all at once, so you fund 10 homes a year for 10 years. By the third year of the program, 30 homes have been improved and 70 are waiting in the

wings. Everything's looking great. But new officials take office and decide to stop funding the program. Now, property values never go up because not enough homes were impacted to improve home values, and homeowners in that area continue to tread water or struggle.

ECGRA specifically prevents that from happening. Because ECGRA's leadership and decision-making is controlled by data and expertise — not politics and terms of office — it can fund those 10 homes per year until all 100 homes are improved and property values rise.

So, ECGRA ensures our gaming funds are invested with community impact at heart and that regional initiatives can be seen through to their completion. Erie gets all this for simply the cost of ECGRA's overhead — which is lower than that of other organizations doing similar work in other parts of the country.

This means ECGRA is lean; it's efficient; and it's effective. Why would we ever want to ruin that?

Thank you.

Seth Trott, treasurer, Impact Corry

Erie Downtown Partnership: ECGRA supports Main Streets

My name is Emily Fetcko, and I am the CEO of the Erie Downtown Partnership, a nonprofit organization serving downtown's commercial core to make downtown Erie safe, fun, and welcoming. In recent years we have made a much larger commitment to both programming and maintaining public space to impact both the economic vibrancy of downtown for businesses and the quality of life for residents and employees. We manage 140 events and activities in downtown year-round; provide cleaning and safety support in the form of sidewalk snow removal, neighborhood patrols, and homeless wellness checks; provide grants to small businesses and property owners, as well as provide marketing support for the downtown.

Our relationship with the Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority has been key in implementing this programming. ECGRA supports our work philosophically as well as financially as a proponent of the national Main Street model. The level of grant support we receive from ECGRA is a tool in leveraging other funds from local, state, and federal resources.

ECGRA staff have attended both the national and statewide Main Street conferences where we have together brought back ideas and resources to the Erie County community. ECGRA has also convened local nonprofits and community leaders for webinars on placemaking, small business support, and navigating COVID-19.

Working with ECGRA was especially beneficial to us as we navigated the pandemic and built out a Main Street support plan for small businesses. Through this collaboration we were able to support 21 businesses with relief and recovery grants, continue our cleaning and safety work, and reinvent our community building programming with digital concerts, connections, and education for small businesses.

We value the network of resources, ideas, and support that ECGRA provides to us and to all those organizations working to make their community better. Their work goes beyond grantmaking and really is more about community-making. We need that same level of support from the county that ECGRA has provided thus far. We value their support and would expect to rely on this same level of support from the county to advance important revitalization work being done by our organization to make downtown safe, fun, and welcoming.

Emily Fetcko, Erie Downtown Partnership

Downtown North East: A uncomplicated, thorough, and accountable grantmaking process

I am Charlene Kerr, the chair of Downtown North East, Inc., a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization whose mission it is to strengthen the viability and economic feasibility of the downtown and its surrounding community. I am also the secretary for North East in Bloom, Inc., another 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization whose goal it is to embrace the America in Bloom mission and beautify/enhance the entire community of North East. An aesthetically pleasing community invites economic development and sustains businesses and jobs for our residents. Critical needs for any community!

Both organizations have been the beneficiaries of a significant number of ECGRA grants — many on behalf of other organizations such as the chamber and others. ECGRA has provided over \$1 million of funds to DNE and other organizations for our projects, all of which benefitted other nonprofits, private businesses, and recreational activities within North East. This \$1 million has been matched with at least \$2 million of other funds, including funds from our local foundations, private businesses, local governments, individuals, and other nonprofits.

Over 50 local business and building owners and nonprofits, such as McCord Memorial Library and the Arts Council, have benefited from grants for façade improvements through ECGRA's Mission Main Street program. Thousands of residents and visitors have enjoyed events, entertainment, the Erie Philharmonic, Winefest, and other activities with funding in part from ECGRA's Special Events and Arts & Culture grants. Many of our lower-income residents would never have the opportunity to participate in these types of events if they were not held in North East and were not subsidized so as to be free to the general public. Many new residents and small businesses have located in North East after first visiting here for one of our many events.

North East in Bloom purchases, plants, and maintains 90 hanging baskets throughout the downtown, as well as over 90 planters in the downtown, parks, gateways, and key locations throughout the community. In addition, working with the North East Historical Society, NEIB has installed historical wraps on five electrical boxes in Gibson Park and key intersections, in addition to placing historic postcard murals (13 so far and 10 more to be placed this year) on key buildings illustrating the past businesses and buildings located in that general area. NEIB also maintains several gardens at gateways and in Heard Park, welcome signs, and murals. Our local foundations have been key contributors to these efforts, matching ECGRA funds. The number of volunteers and volunteer hours for both organizations are too many to enumerate.

ECGRA funds have brought our many different organizations and governments together to coordinate activities and projects, and to capitalize on and enhance available revenue streams. Our efforts, and those of others in the community, have made North East one of the most attractive places in Pennsylvania to visit (per a Facebook article last year).

None of this could be possible without ECGRA and the grants that it provides to small communities.

The ECGRA grant process is uncomplicated, thorough, and accountable. If dollars are not spent as approved by the ECGRA Board, they would have to be returned and/or the grantee would be ineligible for future funds. Closeout reports are required at the end of each grant period and details are required to prove that the funds were spent according to the approved application and agreement. I do not believe that, if these casino funds were transferred to a government authority, that the process would be as unencumbered and apolitical as it is now. I believe that was one of the goals of creating ECGRA in the first place.

It has been our experience that ECGRA staff are easily accessible, responsive, honest, extremely helpful, creative, and apolitical in their service to Erie County municipalities. If a need is presented to the staff, they somehow manage to come up with a funding or technical assistance program to meet that need. In my 40 years of community and economic development experience, I have never worked with an agency that is so positive and responsive to current and changing situations. In addition, the timing of submitting, reviewing, and approving applications and dispersing funds is amazingly quick and efficient. No government agency that I have worked with in 40 years can match this!

North East and our sister Erie County municipalities need ECGRA. There is no other agency or program that offers these kinds of grants in such an accessible and accountable manner.

Please preserve this extremely effective economic development organization and its grant programs.

Charlene M. Kerr, North East Downtown, Inc. and North East in Bloom

Our West Bayfront: ECGRA instrumental to our work

As a nonprofit neighborhood organization, Our West Bayfront has been working in the West Bayfront neighborhoods of Erie since 2017, with a focus on projects that enhance quality of life including housing repairs, blight remediation, public space improvements, and building community identity. The purpose of this letter is to highlight some of the ways in which ECGRA funding has been instrumental in our work.

Prior to the establishment of OWB as a 501(c)(3) neighborhood revitalization organization, ECGRA funding supported initial efforts that led to the development of the neighborhood plan that guides OWB's work in the West Bayfront neighborhoods. Since then, OWB deployed funding through a variety of ECGRA programs to advance our mission of enhancing the quality of life in Erie's West Bayfront neighborhoods. For example:

Renaissance Block and Mission Main Streets funding has enabled OWB to assist 64 OWB property owners with repairs through a matching program that has resulted in \$365,000 in additional private investment in addition to the \$300,000 in grant funding.

The Anchor Building Program helped us set in motion the renovation of a key historic property in OWB's primary commercial corridor, West 8th Street, helping us to secure additional matching dollars to complete the rehabilitation. This project has catalyzed tens of thousands of dollars in additional investments in nearby properties.

The Community Assets Program was a key piece of the funding needed for the overhaul of Bayview Park, which many people know now because of the new splash pad and swinging benches that overlook Presque Isle Bay. As a result, Bayview Park has become not just a neighborhood attraction, but a regional one.

Since 2018, about \$440,000 in ECGRA funding has been invested in the OWB neighborhoods, leveraging over \$2.3 million in investments including owner contributions, grants, and city financing. We appreciate this support from ECGRA, and look forward to continued partnership as we work together to create a better Erie for all.

Anna Frantz, executive director, Our West Bayfront

Fairview resident Andrew Roth: ECGRA benefits all Erie Countians

Dear Dr. Wood, Mr. Davis and Mr. Drexel:

Re: Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority

Originally, I had intended to attend the Erie County Council meeting...but an illness prevents that. So, excuse me for taking the liberty to send you this email in support of the Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority (ECGRA).

There are two kinds of leaders. First, there are those leaders who break things for who knows what motive (perhaps well-intentioned), but who leave disorder in their wake. Then there are those leaders who envision a better future, have the courage to pursue that better future, and have the wit to plan a path to its achievement.

I would like to both thank and congratulate the current members of Erie County Council and your predecessors for having the imagination to envision a better future, the intelligence to plan a path to its achievement, and the courage to stay the course ensuring that their vision came to fruition.

Of course, I refer to the creation of ECGRA. Designed by smart thinking politicians to depoliticize the process for deploying the funds from Presque Isle Downs and Casino, ECGRA has for these last many years fairly and equitably overseen the dispersal of funds to the benefit of all Erie Countians. If old-time Erie politics had prevailed, it is not hard to imagine that the great majority of county revenue derived from the casino would have primarily benefitted the city of Erie and Millcreek Township. Why? While among other reasons, every county executive

save one has been from the city of Erie and Millcreek Township. The exception was Fairview's Barry Grossman, but Grossman always saw himself as an Erieite.

No, as a result of the foresight and positive leadership of past and current Erie County Council members, ECGRA has dispensed funds to the benefit of all Erie countians. With its community improvement grants and "main streets and neighborhood" programs, ECGRA has benefitted Union City, Corry, North East, Girard, and Greene Township among others.

It has also had the wisdom to support nontraditional programs like the Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy which has produced a cadre of dedicated young people focused on public service. Many of its alumni have entered local politics, while others have done valuable research on program models benefitting all Erie Countians.

Again, in closing, I want to thank Erie County Council, both its current members and predecessors, for being leaders with a positive vision for Erie County and the courage to create such an "out-of-the-box" thinking program as ECGRA benefitting all Erie Countians.

Andrew Roth, Fairview

PACA: ECGRA helped turn blighted eyesore into economic engine

Thank you for allowing me to address this body. I appreciate your time.

My name is Mark Tanenbaum. I am the executive director of PACA — The Performing Arts Collective Alliance. I am here today to talk about ECGRA.

PACA is a past recipient of ECGRA funding.

PACA is a 501(c)(3), not-for-profit, arts and entrepreneurial entity, located at 1501-09 State St., Erie. We have been located at that address for nearly 12 years.

When we moved into the PACA Building as it is called today, there were five tenants. Over 75% of the available 70,000 square-foot was empty and devoid of activity. The gas, electric and water had intermittently been turned off and on. The windows were boarded up. Our building was the proverbial eyesore on State Street.

But a group of us decided to take it upon ourselves to make a difference. We decided to be the change we wanted to see.

We cleaned out decades of rubbish, put in heaters and electric, light grids, carpeting, walls and risers. And we put on our first show. We saved our money and reinvested it into additional improvements to our property and put on more shows.

We became the little theater that could. We kept improving our space and doing more work. We renovated studio spaces and found more artists who needed a place to create.

In time we bought the property. We have invested in downtown Erie in a substantial way. And we did it before many higher profile organizations decided to join us.

We pay prevailing wage. We hire union companies. We buy materials from local distributors. We use registered, licensed contractors.

We got on the National Register of Historic Places. We were the first property on the local historic register. We pay 100% of our city, county and school taxes, even though we could pay zero. We have become a community asset in good standing.

We now have 50 full-time arts and entrepreneurial tenants. Each one is an independent contractor and businessperson. People have started in PACA and moved on, like Primo Tailors, to new locations. We provide space and support for immigrants, and the most diverse collection of Erieites imaginable. In any year's time there are no less than 250 events in our building. Sometimes there are three or four public events on the same night. This past week alone we have five public events.

PACA is proof that the arts are economic development. The arts are sustained, concerted actions that promote the standard of living and economic health of Erie County. The arts are drivers of quantitative and qualitative changes in our economy. ECGRA thoroughly supports all of this progress. Without ECGRA, none of this would have been possible.

ECGRA has helped PACA with an Anchor Building Grant. But they didn't do so on our first try. We were initially turned down. We had to prove ourselves. ECGRA set high standards. ECGRA had a rigorous application process. They provided the funds in stages. They oversaw the expenditure of funds in stages. They called us for clarification. They personally inspected the work that was done.

Without ECGRA's faith in PACA we could never have grown to be where we are now. They provide much-needed funds at a much-needed time. They provided "first-in" financial support. Their faith in us boosted our acceptance level with other funding providers.

ECGRA is the vanguard, tip of the spear, and the single most important grassroots supporter of innumerable important examples of countywide growth. They are strict; they are transparent; and they are necessary. Without ECGRA, there would be no place else of institutions like PACA, and hundreds of others, to go.

I urge this body to continue to support ECGRA and their works.

Mark Tanenbaum, executive director of PACA – The Performing Arts Collective Alliance

Former Erie Mayor Savocchio: ECGRA recognized as a national model

Tonight I'd come before Erie County Council wearing many hats. I come as a former mayor of Erie. I come as a founding member and former Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Jefferson Educational Society. And I come as a longtime resident of the city and the county of Erie.

I'm here to support ECGRA. In all these capacities I have learned, worked for and believed in, to get things done, we need to find common ground not just between government but with all sectors of our community. Public-public and public-private partnerships enable us to do so.

During my administration as mayor, this became my foundation to revitalize and rebuild not only city services, but our economic base and the quality of life for all of our citizens. We see today happily, once again, the revitalization and progress being made with such partnerships. From Main Street to boardrooms to our neighborhoods, government is a necessary partner be it local, state or national. It is in partnerships both public and private, that we can find common ground and eventually find progress. The government has played an important role in establishing ECGRA. The state legislature long ago provided for the establishment of authorities. Special legislation was passed by the state in establishing ECGRA.

This legislation concerned distributions of money received from the casino to the state and then turn to ECGRA. Authorities are by law autonomous having their own boards and executive directors. Local government then can appoint members to the authority boards as I know you all know, but authorities have their own missions and purposes. In doing so, authorities can receive funding that city and county government might not have access to always but they can aid in city and counties to leverage. They can also aid in building partnerships that can aid in the progress sought by both city and county governments. ECGRA is a unique authority in that it was created by special state legislation providing funding to

come to Erie County. And as I understand as of now, county receiving \$4 million to \$5 million a year for which I'm sure taxpayers and citizens are most grateful.

Over the last 15 years ECGRA has granted funds to some 226 recipients, all of which have aided in the revitalization of Erie County and its economy. ECGRA is fulfilling its mission and purpose and has won national recognition and has been referred to as the national model in a book entitled "Our Towns" written by James and Deborah Fallows. Erie was one of 41 mid-size American cities that they noted that were bringing revitalization to our economy.

Progress is and should be of top importance, not only to government but to all set sectors of our communities. We see that today in Erie and Erie County. I am reminded of a Chinese proverb which notes while the destination is important, it is the companions we travel with that make it worthwhile. It is in that spirit that I wish to thank ECGRA, its board members, executive director and staff on behalf of myself, on behalf of the Jefferson Educational Society, for the progress they have aided in and for the partnership we share.

Joyce Savocchio, former Erie mayor and founding member and former chair of the board of trustees of the Jefferson Educational Society

Ray Luniewski: ECGRA vital to festivals and events

I'm also here tonight to speak on the advantages and the wonderful thing that we have in our local ECGRA, that takes care of so many groups around the area. I've had the privilege of probably working with half the people behind me on one or another project over the years and half of you guys too up front. We've done a wonderful thing. And ECGRA has been there every step of the way as far as I'm concerned.

I'm primarily representing Lake Erie Fanfare, which is responsible not only for all the drum and bugle corps competitions that have been here the last 40 years ... We've also operated the German festival for the last 20 years. And on a personal note, my wife and I are parishioners at Holy Trinity, so we've chaired Zabawa for the last 11 years. I'm here today not to tell you what's wrong with ECGRA. I am telling you what is good.

First off, you have a bunch of festivals in this town. And people may say, "Oh well, who cares?" Those festivals — the Italian, the Polish, the German, the Greek, whoever — we pull in well into the hundreds of thousands of people. They all eat. They all drink. And all that food and that product is sourced locally. ECGRA helps us each and every year through their events program that they have. We go through and apply for it and then of course have to account for

it at the end. There's a long, long report that's done for each one. But they get it. They understand the importance of bringing these festivals in and how many people travel from out of town to get here for these things. So I guess for consideration these festivals, say there is six of us, we're getting between \$5,000 and \$6,000 a year in money, \$35,000 total. That \$35,000 is leveraged into hundreds of thousands of people that come here. They spend time in Erie. They spend money in Erie. We spend money in Erie. I know we spend a ton of money for food and everything else. So you take that. If you gave it to a project out on the sidewalk here, you'd probably get about 100 lineal foot of sidewalk put down for that same \$35,000, whereas you're bringing in hundreds of thousands of people.

We get it done with all volunteers. It's the one nice thing about all of it. It's all volunteer. Everything that I'm involved with is strictly volunteer. We have no paid people that are getting salaries. There's nothing of that. That money goes right straight into making the program. How did we get here? Most of the groups like myself with Fanfare and all the churches that did this, we all ran bingo years ago. In the 1980s, you could go every night and there was at least four or five bingos all over town. When the casino came in, we were all, "What's going to happen now?" We found out because when the casino opened our 130-person bingo crowd on that first Sunday dropped to 80. We all started losing. One by one the churches folded up bingo. Groups like ours folded up even faster.

County Council made a promise to us at several meetings like this. We would not be forgotten. When the money was going to be distributed, there were going to be the six lead assets and there was going to be a pool for all the other people to apply to. When that got started, it stalled out for almost two full years. There was nothing happened. That money just kept accumulating. No awards were made. And all of a sudden ECGRA came on the scene. They rolled out and I want to say within weeks, checks were coming out. There was grants that were done. Things were applied for. Projects got funding. And that has continued right up until this very day. I'm not sure what any problems might have been with everything. But I can tell you, it's a pretty smooth machine on the inside when you're trying to get money for these programs and keep going with it.

Ray Luniewski, executive director of Lake Erie Fanfare

ECGRA helps Edinboro and farmers

My name is Marti Marks. I live in Edinboro, District 6. I'd like to thank Erie County Council for this opportunity to speak and for your supportive efforts. I live and work in Edinboro.

ECGRA funds have supported several projects in the borough that have made it a town I'm proud to live in. From the facade grants that renovate the public-facing side of our older downtown buildings to ongoing supportive events like the arts and music festival that draws thousands of people to Edinboro each May, ECGRA funding helps to drive economic growth in my community.

I'm also co-founder and executive director of the Edinboro Market, a 501 (c)(3) fresh food business incubator that opened in December of 2017 to provide a year-round storefront for local small farms and food entrepreneurs. We currently support 80 small businesses by providing a retail location for their products, along with input on product development. In six years of operation, we sold \$1.35 million in product grown or made made within 150 miles of Edinboro, all out of a 900-square-foot space. Seventy-five percent of those sales are returned directly to the producer, which means Edinboro Market has added over a million dollars to the local economy.

In spring of 2023, we applied for ECGRA community center funds as a partial match to a \$663,000 federal investment through the Appalachian Regional Commission. Both proposals were funded and the project began in November of last year. The project titled "Cultivating the Agriculinary Industry in Northwest Pennsylvania," focuses on both economic development by providing support and resources for those working intentionally to feed their community, and workforce development by illuminating a pathway for young people interested in food and farming careers.

Through this project, we will work with partners at Chatham University ... to provide business skills and mentoring for adults starting a food or farm business, while also provide apprenticeships and hands-on opportunities for youth interested in careers in food and farming through collaboration with the Erie Farm-to-School program. We will double our retail space, providing more room for more products for additional producers. We will open a shared-use kitchen which can be rented by the hour by businesses needing an inspected kitchen to produce their products. Specifically, ECGRA funding will cover a portion of the construction costs including an electric upgrade to the building we've purchased and a significant amount of the equipment for the commercial kitchen. This investment will help us to reinforce the importance of healthy delicious food as part of a welcoming community and a vibrant economy. ECGRA funding priorities assist nonprofits fulfill their missions in many ways across your accounting. For this reason, we ask council to support their current breadth of funding initiatives. Thank you.

Marti Marks is a founder of the Edinboro Market

Police Athletic League 'forever grateful' for ECGRA

Good evening. I'll be very brief. I know it's been a long night for everybody. I am very honored to be here. I first off want to thank the current council members and the council members of the past for everything that you've done for our particular program through the years, so for that I thank you. I'm not here for any political agenda.

I heard it said several times tonight, "doing the right thing." The one thing that I can attest to and I can speak on tonight is what ECGRA has done for our program the Police Athletic League from year one back in 2015, going into 2016 with our former Chief of Police Randy Bowers and also former Mayor Joe Sinnott. When the vision was hatched with regards to starting the Police Athletic League, not a lot of people believed in us. Not a lot of people thought that this was going to work. So as we're sitting down formulating this plan to you know to start working with the kids in our community, funding was a major concern. And I remember that ECGRA — it was the first time that I had ever even heard of ECGRA — they were the first ones to the table. They were the first ones that came in and went through the grant process.

I didn't know anything about grant writing and processes. I'm a police officer. But through the years I had to educate myself as this program grew. And again, I want to thank you guys because I know you hear about PAL, probably at least a couple times a year. But that small investment in the infancy stages, I can't thank that entity enough. We started off at Pfeiffer-Burleigh Elementary School with 35 kids the first year. Going into year two, it grew like a wildfire. I remember thinking I don't know how we're going to be able financially to provide the kids in the schools the things that we have. So enter year two, we reapplied for another ECGRA grant and they delivered again. So as time went on, we got through year two, brought on three more locations. Fast forward to now, we are in 19 different locations throughout the city. Thirty-five kids to 1,200 kids actively in the program. And in about a month or two, I know that you guys are going to hear about us branching out even further, bringing on other jurisdictions in Erie County, not just the city of Erie. So, you know, with that being said, I'm forever grateful for ECGRA being the first ones to the table when it started off as a little idea with no financial backing. And the interesting thing about that is, I was taught by Perry (Wood) and the people that worked with ECGRA on how to be fiscally responsible, how to run a nonprofit program and to grow this program to what it turned into today.

ECGRA lit the spark for our program and our entity when nobody else in the beginning gave us a chance — and actually, I'll take it a step further, and say that at that particular time, it

really wasn't fashionable for police to be even working with the youth in our community. But I'm here to tell you that although you as council members don't get to see the finished product, I'm blessed that I get to see that every day.

I hear a lot of people talking tonight about investing in property. That is extremely important, but I would venture to bet that that isn't worth as much as investing in people and in our youth, and that's what we're doing and what ECGRA allowed us to do in the beginning.

Lt. Tom Lenox, Erie Bureau of Police's PAL coordinator

Advertisement

A look at evidence in claims against ECGRA

Davis accuses gaming board of violating local law, contract

A.J.

Rao

Eric Times-News USA TODAY NETWORK
TUESDAY APRIL 2, 2024

Eric County Executive Brenton Davis has been open in criticizing the Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority.

Evidence to support his claims, including allegations that ECGRA has violated local law and an American Rescue Plan contract, has been harder to establish.

Here's a closer look.

Davis claims ECGRA violated Right-to-Know Law

Much of Davis' criticism of ECGRA has involved the speed at which ECGRA provides information to him. In early February, Davis formally requested years of financial records from ECGRA. The records, which stretched back to ECGRA's inception in 2009, included a comprehensive report of each loan issued by the authority; contracts, check detail reports and credit card statements since 2016; financial interest reports and conflict of interest statements since 2009; and a detailed account of all payments made to ECGRA Executive Director Perry Wood since 2012.

Due to the breadth of materials, ECGRA responded that they would treat

the request like a standard Right-to-Know request and require 30 additional days to gather the information.

Davis, appearing at an ECGRA board meeting Feb. 15, said the authority was showing "resistance to accountability."

He said other organizations were more forthcoming, that he "requested the same thing" from the Erie County Redevelopment Authority and Diverse Erie and received responses in a matter of hours.

"In about three hours, they had every detail of every loan," he said of the Redevelopment Authority.

However, Davis requested three years' worth of records from the Redevelopment Authority, according to a Feb. 7 email obtained by the Erie Times-News.

Diverse Erie has existed since 2021.

By March 6, ECGRA had posted the requested financial records on its website. Davis still accused the authority of violating the Right-to-Know Law during a March 18 interview on TalkErie radio.

He claimed ECGRA took more than 30 days to provide him the information and that, as county executive, he oversees ECGRA and should not have to go through the Right-to-Know process.

ECGRA Solicitor Tim Wachter, in a Feb. 9 memo to Wood and Board Chairman Dale Barney, stated that while he agreed that Davis has the authority to request the documents, the Home Rule Charter is "silent as to the time periods and processes to be used to comply with such a request."

"As the county executive does not have the power to dictate the day-today activities of ECGRA, the county executive cannot dictate the timeline governing the provision of those records," Wachter wrote in the memo.

Davis claims ECGRA violated American Rescue Plan contract

Davis in March turned attention to ECGRA's compliance with the American Rescue Plan.

ECGRA received \$4 million of the county's ARP funds in 2021 as part of a transformative grant agreement.

Roughly \$3.6 million of that total was put toward ECGRA's grant awards. The remainder was put toward administrative costs, including \$93,406 for salaries and benefits, according to a copy of the agreement obtained by the Erie Times-News.

Since the agreement has a three-year grant period, ECGRA has until Dec. 31 to use the funds.

Davis, however, has accused ECGRA of violating the agreement.

In a March 14 email to Wood, Davis wrote that he had concerns about “direct violations” of the agreement.

He claimed in a March 18 interview on TalkErie radio that ECGRA was “in violation” of the contract. Specifically, he noted that ECGRA had depleted its \$93,406 in salaries and benefits within the first two years alone.

“I just called (ECGRA) this week and I said, ‘Hey, you’ve already outspent — for a three-year contract, you’re authorized X amount of money — well, you already spent all your overhead in two years. You’re in violation of a contract,’” Davis said.

Wood pushed back against the claim.

“The assertion from the county executive is that because we spent this line item down, we’re now going to overbill the county,” Wood said at a March 21 board meeting. “There would be no reason that we would do that.”

Wood stressed that it was the former Erie County Executive Kathy Dahlkemper administration, not ECGRA, that required a portion of the \$4 million to go toward administrative costs in 2021.

“We weren’t even asking for administrative funds in the first place,” he said.

Wood added that Wachter performed a legal review and deemed the authority to be in compliance with the ARP agreement.

In a March 15 email to Davis, Wood requested written documentation to prove that ECGRA was in violation of the agreement. Wood told the Erie Times-News on Friday that Davis had not responded.

Erie County Public Information Officer Chris Carroll, contacted by the Times-News, said the administration did not have a comment on the matter.

Other claims

Davis has claimed that ECGRA continues to retain a political lobbyist.

“Why does this authority spend \$5,000 per month on a political lobbyist? \$60,000 per year and has for years,” he wrote on a recent post to his campaign re-election Facebook page.

ECGRA, however, doesn’t have a lobbyist anymore, according to Wood.

ECGRA retained the lobbyist, the Ridge Policy Group, from 2016 to 2020, to initially better leverage the region’s gaming funds and later to ensure local share gaming revenue remained in state legislation after the Pennsylvania Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional in 2016. Davis has also criticized ECGRA for paying for Wood’s doctorate program at the University of Pittsburgh, asking in a Facebook post, “What if elected officials had their doctorate paid for at the expense of taxpayers?” Wood said ECGRA paid for one year of tuition and books before he chose to withdraw from reimbursements.

Davis has also claimed that he’s not “singling out” ECGRA and blamed the news media for creating a “frenzy” around his scrutiny. He said he’s requested similar information from other organizations and that his goal is mere accountability.

However, unlike with other organizations, the Davis administration sent its requests for ECGRA’s records directly to the news media. Davis also invited the news media for interviews shortly after he threatened to dissolve the authority during a Jan. 18 ECGRA board meeting.

The administration did not notify the news media that it requested financial records from the Redevelopment Authority or Diverse Erie. “It’s very frustrating to communicate with an elected official through the media rather than through the established liaison system that Erie County government created to increase communication between government and their authorities,” Wood told the Erie Times-News. “So, if his goal is to frustrate — it’s working. We would like to see the system work the way it was supposed to through a liaison in which questions are asked and answered — not accusations flung through the media.”

A.J. Rao can be reached at arao@gannett.com. Follow him on X @ETNRao.



\$1 MILLION

in makeovers



Façade grants lift up downtown North East.

There's nothing like a fresh coat of paint to breathe new life into a building.

And now more businesses in downtown North East than ever are putting their best foot forward thanks to façade grants offered through Downtown North East and the Borough of North East.

Since 2013, more than \$1 million has been invested into façade improvements, or more specifically any part of the building that can be seen from the street. That includes a wide variety of projects—from paint and repairs, to awnings and signs, doors and windows, even entryway carpets.

Here's how it works. Building owners apply with details and an estimated cost for their project. Once their project is approved and completed, owners get reimbursed for 50 percent of the expense up to \$10,000.



The program utilizes Mission Main Street grant funding from the Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority and often includes additional matching by funds from the North East Community Foundation.

"Our business has been on Main Street since 1950," said W. Douglas Bemiss, president of MK Bemiss Agency Inc. whose business has utilized grant funds to assist with painting the entire exterior as well as updating signage. "This grant was an opportunity to extend our own resources and renew our building and signs with a fresh new look, while still keeping the traditional historic feel of downtown North East.

"Many of our long-term customers commented on how much they like our new look and color scheme, and we also gained new customers who noticed our agency's improvements."

Each year, new grants expand the reach of the repairs. Recent projects along Main and Lake streets have brought new, colorful painted exteriors to The Flower Cart, La Casa de Pizza, North East News Journal, and The Apple Basket, to name a few.

It's hard to miss the giant new mug sign that welcomes customers to The Bean coffee shop or the updated metal canopy in front of Dragonfly Sweets. While improvements at Yori

Wine Cellars and McCord Library not only beautified the historic buildings but helped remedy leaks that were causing damage.

"The downtown façade grants have been instrumental in businesses trying to update and stay competitive visually," said Tamara Walters, owner/president of The Bean Coffee House and Small City Roasting Co. "It has been such a blessing each year I have applied.

"I am always very grateful for the help in keeping the outside of my building an equal reflection of the inside and the service and experience I am offering."

At The Straw Hat Sundae Shoppe, grant funds helped enclose the outdoor counter, transforming the seasonal location into a welcoming area to order or enjoy ice cream no matter what the weather.

Maintaining the historical architecture of downtown North East is a priority, said Richard Tefft, local historian.

"The 1884 fire in downtown North East burned down about two thirds of North East's business district," he explained. "The buildings were all rebuilt within the next 20 years to identical time-frame architecture and building standards.

"Investing in these buildings and making them last is important to the community."

Spring 2024

NEIGHBOR TO NEIGHBOR



Donors Making a Difference

Grants are an extremely beneficial funding source for the Inner-City Neighborhood Art House especially for special projects that are above and beyond our normal expenses. That is why The Erie Community Foundation, Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority (ECGRA), and Find Your Light Foundation are our featured donors making a difference this month.

Because of these grants we were able to replace our roof and carpeting which were original to our founding in 1995! We now have a brand-new roof over our heads (that should last another twenty-five plus years), and new Marmoleum flooring instead of carpeting that allows us to offer a wider variety of classes in those spaces while also improving the cleanliness of those rooms.

We are deeply grateful for the support from The Erie Community Foundation, Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority, and Find Your Light Foundation. You have helped us to continue to inspire a better future through the arts.



Many thanks to our 2023 Pennsylvania Educational Improvement Tax Credit Program (EITC) Contributors!

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Gift cards to stores that sell art supplies, general office supplies, healthy snacks, or personal care items	Garden plants
Individually packaged healthy snacks	Lego dots
	Potting Soil
	Polyfill
	Sketch pads
	Watercolor paper

Memorial

A special thank you to the family of Katherine "Kay" Hosterman for designating a memorial to the Neighborhood Art House in her memory.