

## **Minutes for Buffalo Niagara Coalition for Open Government December 10, 2020**

Meeting held via Zoom called to order at 6:35 p.m. Present: Paul Wolf, Sonia Dusza, Janet Vito, Larry Vito, Joseph Kissel, Maria Tisby, Ed Mckee, Gary Dickson, Alberta Roman and Susan Kims.

**Meeting Minutes:** The meeting minutes from November 12, 2020, were unanimously approved on a motion made by Larry and seconded by Maria.

**Treasurer's Report:** Janet Vito provided a written report showing our account balance as of November 30, 2020 being \$1,357.92. We currently have twenty-one paid members. Ed made a motion to accept the report which was seconded by Maria and unanimously approved.

**Niagara County Lawsuit:** Niagara County Supreme Court Judge Frank Caruso has signed the Order indicating that the local law passed by Niagara County violates FOIL and that we are entitled to receive the financial disclosure forms we requested. Paul will file the Order with the Niagara County Legislature and request that they put it on their meeting agenda. The Judge still has to decide the issue of whether Niagara County will be responsible for paying our attorney fees.

**FOIL Training Event:** The event we had to cancel for September, featuring Kristin O'Neil from the New York State Committee on Open Government and reporter Steven Brown will be held January 8, 2021 at 10:00 am via Zoom.

**FOIL Letter to NY State Committee on Open Government:** Our organization with eight other groups signed a joint letter encouraging the State Committee to address FOIL issues in their annual report. The letter also requested the Committee to study the issue of how well FOIL is working in New York State.

**Review of 2020 Accomplishments:** Paul went over a list of things we accomplished this year:

- West Seneca Bee Editorial Mentions Our 2019 School District Report and that Improvements Have Been Made Since, Such as: Having the public speak before voting occurs, video taping and posting of meetings online.
- Changed Our Name to the New York Coalition For Open Government
- Successfully filed a Lawsuit Against Niagara County With the Assistance of the UB Law School Regarding Financial Disclosure Forms. Niagara County Supreme Court ruled in our favor that Niagara County violated the Freedom of Information Law.
- Held a Zoom Forum Regarding the Open Meetings Law, which 38 people from across NY State attended.

- Released report Local Governments Mute the Public During Remote Meetings, our first statewide report on how local governments are conducting meetings during COVID-19. 15 reporters from across the state attended a Zoom press conference. The report documented that 67% of local governments studied eliminated hearing from the public during pandemic remote meetings.
- Successfully supported the repeal of NY Civil Rights Law 50-a, which made police disciplinary forms confidential from the public.
- The Erie County Legislature due to our efforts began posting videos of their meetings online in June.
- Became a 501(c)(3) organization.
- Released a report titled “Local Governments Struggle With Timely Posting of Meeting Minutes”. The report documented that 70% of local governments are not timely posting meeting minutes.
- The City of Rome in response to our report updated the posting of their meeting audio recordings.
- In response to an email, sent to every NY state legislator, Senator Kaplan and Assemblymember Frontus introduced legislation to mandate that local governments live stream their meetings and post recordings online.
- The Lockport Housing Authority after receiving a letter from the Coalition provided instructions on their website as to how the public could hear their teleconference meetings live. For the first time a meeting agenda was posted a week in advance of the meeting.
- At the Coalition’s request the New York State Committee on Open Government has begun posting their meeting notice and agenda with documents on their web page. The Committee’s Board of Directors reversed the position of their Executive Director and allowed for public comment to occur at their Board meeting.
- State Legislator Amy Paulin at the Coalition’s request introduced legislation to amend the Open Meetings Law to mandate that meeting documents must be posted online prior to a meeting.
- Released report regarding Open Meetings Law Violations occurring in city of Mount Vernon, NY. Held a Zoom meeting with residents and City Councilmembers regarding our report.

- Called on Erie County to be more transparent in releasing Covid information to the public. Supported a resolution by the Erie County Legislature, which passed unanimously. Erie County since this effort has released more information to the public.
- Joined eight other organizations in calling upon the New York State Committee on Open Government to address the need for FOIL reform in their annual report.

**2021 Projects:** Paul reviewed possible projects for taking on in 2021:

- Increase attendance at our meetings from outside of Erie/Niagara
- Increase number of Facebook followers
- Zoning/Planning Boards – posting of meeting documents
- Villages – posting of meeting minutes
- Counties – live streaming of meetings
- School Districts – executive sessions
- FOIL – City Council Financial Disclosure Forms
- Sunshine Week – need to amend NY Open Meetings Law
- September Speaker event

Paul mentioned that Joe suggested we do an annual report to highlight our accomplishments and changes we are advocating for. We could release a report similar to what the NY State Committee does.

Alberta mentioned that redistricting commissions will be forming in 2021 to draw district lines and that this process should be open to the public. Paul will look into whether such meetings are required to open.

Joe raised the issue of publicizing our meeting dates more to attract new people.

**New Business:** Paul mentioned that next month some board seats are up for re-appointment and we have some vacancies to fill.

**Adjourn:** Maria made a motion to adjourn seconded by Joe, meeting adjourned at 7:35 pm. Next meeting will be January 10<sup>th</sup> at 6:30 pm, via Zoom.