

Minutes for Buffalo Niagara Coalition for Open Government July 9, 2020

Meeting held via Zoom called to order at 6:35 p.m. Present: Paul Wolf, Sonia Dusza, Maria Tisby, Ed McKee, Janet Vito, Larry Vito, Richard Bertrand, Steve Lyle.

Meeting Minutes: The meeting minutes from June 11, 2020, were unanimously approved on a motion made by Richard and seconded by Ed.

Treasurer's Report: Janet Vito provided a written report to Paul Wolf showing our account balance as \$837.92 as of June 30, 2020. We currently have sixteen paid members. Larry made a motion to accept the report which was seconded by Maria and unanimously approved.

Niagara County Lawsuit: Paul Wolf stated that the Courts are currently closed and as such our lawsuit against Niagara County is on hold until things open back up. The attorney handling the lawsuit will be requesting a written response from Niagara County. As no response has been received yet.

Report: Local Governments Mute the Public During Remote Meetings: On May 12th we released our first statewide report. We reviewed 21 local governments from across the state. The key finding was that 67% eliminated hearing from the public during their April meetings. This is further proof of the need to amend the Open Meetings Law to mandate that the public be heard during meetings.

The Erie County Legislature is now posting videos of their meetings, which was not being done prior to our report.

The New York State Committee on Open Government: Several Coalition members observed the New York State Committee on Open Government Board meeting, which was held by video online. Paul Wolf pointed out that the State Committee does a poor job of publicizing their meetings, that meeting agendas and minutes are not posted online and they do not allow the public to speak at their meetings. Paul Wolf has brought these concerns to the attention of the Committee and hopefully changes will be made in the future.

Next Report Focusing on Smaller Local Governments: A press conference releasing our latest report which focused on smaller local governments is scheduled for July 10th. The key finding in this report was that 70% of local governments are not timely posting meeting minutes. 35% of local governments had at least one violation of the Open Meetings Law.

Becoming a 501(c)(3): Our paper work to become a tax exempt 501(c)(3) organization has been approved by the IRS. We can now apply for grant funding to help with our work.

September/October Speaker Event Ideas: After discussion it was agreed to do an event focusing on FOIL, featuring Kristin O'Neil from the New York State Committee on Open Government and a local news reporter experienced in FOIL. We will do the event by Zoom so that people statewide can participate. Paul will work out the details.

New Business: Paul talked about a project with MuckRock, which is an organization that does FOIL work. MuckRock has filed 700 FOIL requests to obtain police disciplinary records from police departments across New York State. The UB Transparency Clinic is assisting with the project and have inquired about our assisting with the effort.

Paul discussed obtaining grant funding for a project to obtain financial disclosures forms of elected officials across NY State, which could then be posted on our website. We could partner with some other local organizations such as UB in doing this project.

Ed McKee brought up the idea of taking a look at school districts in a future report.

Adjourn: Richard made a motion to adjourn seconded by Janet, meeting adjourned at 7:15 pm. Next meeting will be September 10th at 6:30 pm, probably via Zoom.