

Minutes for Buffalo Niagara Coalition for Open Government January 3, 2019

Meeting called to order at 5:33 p.m. by Paul Wolf. Present: Richard Bertrand, Jim Lawson, Janet Vito, Larry Vito, Nancy Correa, Steve Lyle, Karen Lyle, Joseph Kissel, Mike Kless, Ed McKee, Sonia Dusza, Carla Speranza, Tom Frank

Meeting Minutes: Mike Kless made a motion to approve the minutes from the November 1, 2018 meeting, seconded by Larry Vito. Minutes unanimously approved.

Treasurer's Report: Ed McKee reported our account balance as \$904.17. Richard Bertrand made a motion to accept the Treasurer's Report seconded by Mike Kless. Treasurer's Report unanimously approved.

Board Elections: Mike Kless made a motion seconded by Ed McKee to nominate Paul Wolf, Ed McKee, Gary Dickson and Joseph Kissel for a two-year term as a Board Director ending in January of 2021. The motion was unanimously approved.

Board Officer Positions: Mike Kless made a motion seconded by Sonia Dusza to nominate the following individuals for a two-year term as a Board Officer expiring January 2021: Paul Wolf for President, Ed McKee Vice President for Erie County, Richard Bertrand Vice President for Niagara County, Janet Vito for Treasurer, Joseph Kissel for Secretary. The motion was unanimously approved.

Becoming a 501(C)(3): In order to move forward with becoming a tax exempt corporation there is paperwork that needs to be signed by Paul Wolf as President, Ed McKee as Vice President and Richard Bertrand as Vice President. Paul will work on this item.

FOIL Log Report: Paul Wolf discussed that the National Freedom of Information Coalition (NFOIC) is seeking submissions of FOIL research proposals. The top 3 selected papers will win a cash prize and an invitation to present the paper at an upcoming conference in Dallas this April. Instead of releasing our report now, Paul suggested submitting it for this competition and see if we win. Mike Kless made a motion to submit our FOIL research project to the NFOIC, seconded by Janet Vito. The motion was unanimously approved.

University at Buffalo Council Meetings: Paul Wolf reported that he sent a letter to the UB Council as approved at our last meeting. The letter pointed out that the Council meeting room is too small to accommodate the public and that the Council is not posting meeting agenda items on their website as required by the Open Meetings Law. Paul attended the Council's December meeting and was disappointed to see that the Council did not allow the public to speak at their meeting.

Cheektowaga Ethics Code: Paul was contacted by a member of the Cheektowaga Board of Ethics expressing concern that the Town Board was scheduled to vote on a new Ethics Code without the Ethics Board's review.

The Ethics Board has been working on a new Code for months and just when they are about to finish their work the Town Board scheduled a public hearing to obtain public input for a document that has not even been posted on the Town's website.

Due to opposition expressed by Ethic's Board members the Town Board tabled a vote on the new Ethics Code. The new Code has now been posted online, which Paul has reviewed. The new Code changes the Financial Disclosure form by removing the existing form which we rated as one of the better forms and replaces it with a form that asks for less information. It was agreed that we will send a letter to the Cheektowaga Town Board expressing our concern over the new Ethics Code being proposed.

Partnership for the Public Good (PPG): We submitted a proposal seeking support for amending the New York State Open Meetings Law as part of the PPG Community Agenda. Our proposal did not finish in the top ten but it was a good experience in that those that attended the event learned about our efforts.

Review of 2018 Accomplishments: Paul reviewed a two-page document that highlighted our accomplishments as a group for 2018:

Released Report Regarding Local Gov. Websites

Released Report Regarding Local Authorities Websites

Lockport Housing Authority, Wheatfield Local Development, Lancaster, Town of Lewiston, Erie County Leg, Niagara County Leg., Lockport Housing Authority, NFTA, Erie County Water Authority all made changes to their websites

Spoke to the: Lockport City Council, West Seneca Town Board, Erie County Water Authority, Niagara Falls City Council, Lockport Housing Authority, North Tonawanda City Council, Niagara County Legislature

Became Incorporated as a NY Not-For Profit Corporation

Created an 11person Board of Directors

Obtained first corporate sponsor Lipsitz & Ponterio (\$300)

Press Coverage: Channel 2 News, Channel 4, Lockport Sun, Niagara Gazette, Hamburg Sun, Buffalo News, Time Warner Cable, WBFO, Cheektowaga Bee, Clarence Bee, Vince Anello radio show, Partnership for Public Good radio show

Hamburg Supervisor James Shaw at the Coalition's urging became the first local elected official in Erie & Niagara County to post his financial disclosure form online

Lockport Housing Authority changed how they do their motions for executive sessions.

Coalition Board Member Richard Bertrand was appointed to the Lockport Housing Authority Board

The Erie County Water Authority included our website report in their RFP soliciting a website designer to improve their site

Released Report Regarding Financial Disclosures

West Seneca changed their meeting agenda to allow citizens to speak before town board members vote as recommended in our website report. For at least 14 years, their meeting agenda had citizens speak at the end of the meeting. West Seneca now live streams their meetings.

For at least 10 years the Niagara County Legislature has held a committee meeting, where the public was not allowed to attend because the room was “too small”. Due to our efforts the public is no longer excluded from such meetings.

Clarence changed their meeting agenda to put back a public comment period, which was removed.

Niagara Falls Mayor, Councilmember Kenny Tompkins became the first local elected officials in Niagara County to post their financial disclosure forms online.

Niagara County Legislature created a committee to address financial disclosure

Held a Forum featuring Susan Lerner & Alex Camarda, where we also honored several of our members for their efforts.

Co-sponsored a voting rights forum

Joined the Partnership for Public Good network

The UB Council moved their meetings to a larger room to accommodate the public

Obtained new Board members and new Board officers

Held 9 Board meetings with attendance ranging from 8 to 15, with an average attendance of 11 people

Obtained a logo for our letter head

Goals for 2019: Projects and goals for 2019 were discussed as outlined in a document prepared by Paul. Paul will prepare a calendar to guide us through 2019:

Internal Goals:

- Become a 501(c)(3)
- Increase number of Facebook followers from 134 to 250
- Increase paid memberships
- Post meeting agendas & minutes online regularly

Project Goals

- Amend Niagara County Financial Disclosure Law
- Report regarding Colleges & Universities, Meeting Agendas, Minutes & participation
- Obtain support from local governments regarding best practices
- Review School Districts
- Report regarding Ethics Boards
- September Speaker Event
- Report regarding Local Governments, posting of agendas & minutes
- FOIL report regarding emails/text messages
- Continue push to amend Open Meetings Law

New Business: Sonia Dusza spoke about her concerns regarding code enforcement officers and the need for Planning Boards to properly explain their decisions.

Adjourn: Meeting was adjourned at 6:55 pm., on a motion by Larry Vito, seconded by Richard Bertrand. Next meeting will be February 14, 2019, 6:30 pm at the Williamsville Library.