

Minutes for Buffalo Niagara Coalition for Open Government September 5, 2019

Meeting called to order at 6:33 p.m. by Paul Wolf. Present: Paul Wolf, Janet Vito, Joe Kissel, Richard Bertrand, Ed McKee, Mike Kless, Sonia Dusza.

Meeting Minutes: The meeting minutes from July 11, 2019, were approved on a motion made by Ed McKee, seconded by Mike Kless.

Treasurer's Report: Janet Vito reported our account balance as \$1,131.55. Twenty-two paid memberships have been received as of 8/31/19. \$32.62 was spent on obtaining a magnetic sign with our logo for our press conference podium. Mike Kless made a motion to approve the Treasurer's Report which was seconded by Ed McKee. Motion was unanimously approved.

Niagara County Financial Disclosure Forms & Speaking at Their Meetings: Richard Bertrand as Vice President of our organization filed a FOIL request seeking copies of the disclosure forms filed by legislators the past five years. If our request is denied we will appeal the denial and file a lawsuit.

Legislator Virtuoso has filed a resolution seeking to change when citizens get to speak to Niagara County legislators at their meetings. If you want to speak on an item that is not on the meeting agenda you have to wait until the meeting is adjourned to speak. People speaking on an agenda item get to speak at the beginning of the meeting. Virtuoso is seeking to have all citizens who sign up to speak to be heard at the beginning of the meeting instead of making some wait hours until the end of the meeting.

Paul Wolf spoke to the Administration Committee of the legislature on August 6th in support of Virtuoso's resolution. Majority Leader Bradt proposed an amendment that speakers on non-agenda items can speak earlier in the meeting if there is time left over from the thirty minutes that are allotted for the public. Paul said that he would support such an amendment as an improvement to the current process.

Unfortunately the Legislature did not pass Virtuoso's resolution or Bradt's amendment so the process of having non-agenda speakers wait until the meeting is over continues.

Paul will also contact the Erie County Legislature regarding the fact that they don't allow the public to speak at their meetings.

Lockport Housing Authority: A letter written by Coalition Vice President Richard Bertrand published in the Lockport Sun Journal was discussed. In his letter Richard who serves on the Lockport Housing Authority Board pointed out that at a recent meeting four resolutions were voted on that did not appear on the Housing Authority's published meeting agenda. According to Richard in 2018, less than 50% of all resolutions appeared on a Lockport Housing Authority meeting agenda prior to the meeting. A motion was made at our June meeting that we should send a letter expressing our concern as to how Lockport Housing Authority meeting agendas are being handled. On July 8th, a letter was sent to the Lockport Housing Authority.

A copy of the response received from the Housing Authority attorney was provided. The Housing Authority does not have a policy in place as far as dealing with late filed items. Many government entities have a policy which prevents a late filed item from being considered if one member objects. This issue could be the basis for a report next year.

Lockport School Board Committee Meetings: An article that appeared in the Lockport Union Sun paper was discussed. School Board member Kyle Lambalzer proposed that all Lockport School Board committee meetings be open to the public. Some school board members expressed concern about having all committee meetings being open to the public and based on that the resolution seeking open meetings was tabled. Joe Kissel made a motion that we send a letter expressing support for open committee meetings to the Lockport School Board. The motion was seconded by Ed McKee and unanimously approved.

A copy of the letter being sent to the Lockport City School Board was provided.

September Speaker Event: Mark Scheer from the Niagara Gazette & Lockport Sun, Deidre Williams, Buffalo News and Steven Brown, WGRZ Channel 2 News are confirmed to participate in our forum on September 25th, titled “Your Right to Know: The News Media and the Freedom of Information Law. The event will be held at the Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural Site, 641 Delaware Ave. Buffalo from 6:00 to 8:00 pm.

Deidre Williams from the Buffalo News will not be able to attend the forum. Paul will work on finding a replacement. Bringing food and drinks was discussed.

FOIL Project Regarding Emails & Texts: Paul Wolf will be sent a FOIL request to local government officials seeking copies of email and text messages exchanged between elected officials. We are tracking whether FOIL is being complied with as far as properly acknowledging our request and providing the requested information. Plan is to release our report in October.

New Business: Paul Wolf was invited by Jonathan Manes to speak at a New York State Bar Association committee meeting in Syracuse on October 16th. The Bar Association has formed a committee to look into issues regarding news reporting and access to government information. This will be good exposure for our organization. Paul plans to focus his remarks on the need to amend the Open Meetings Law.

Paul has reached out to some state legislators to obtain support for focusing on the Open Meetings Law without any success. Janet Vito suggested trying to meet with legislators or their staff in person.

Paul mentioned that he is having trouble uploading our meeting agendas and minutes to our website and he will reach out to our website designer to see if we can fix these issues, which may involve paying the designer for his work.

The filling of Robert Freeman’s job as the Executive Director of the New York State Committee for Open Government was discussed.

Joe Kissell brought up the issue of addressing NY State's adoption laws which prevent adopted children from finding out information regarding their birth parents as a transparency issues that perhaps we should get involved with. Paul and others expressed concern about becoming involved with this issue as being outside the scope of open government.

Adjourn: Motion to adjourn made by Janet Vito and seconded by Richard Bertrand. Meeting adjourned at 7:45 pm. Next meeting will be October 3, 6:30 pm at the Williamsville Library.