

Blue Ribbon Commission Final Report

Analysis of Erie County Taxing Authorities' Spending Efficiencies

Blue Ribbon Commission
June - 2025

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary.....	3
Committee Members.....	4
Property Taxes in Erie County.....	5
Public Involvement Plan	6
Ritter Public Library, Vermilion (January 21st)	6
Groton Township Hall, Groton Township (January 28th)	6
Huron Public Library, Huron (February 4th)	6
Erie County Offices, Sandusky (February 11th)	6
Recommendations & Advocacy	8
1. Health Insurance	8
2. Local Courts	10
Advocacy	12
3. Water and Sewer Infrastructure	13
4. Economic Development	15
Advocacy	17
5. Education.....	18
Advocacy	19
6. Information Technologies	20
Advocacy	22
7. Purchasing	23
Advocacy	25
8. Fire Services.....	26
Advocacy	28
9. Police Services	30
Advocacy	32
10. Roadway Infrastructure	33
Advocacy	35
11. Other Services Reviewed	36
Public Health Resources.....	36
Public Transportation	36

Libraries	36
Erie MetroParks	37
The Role of the Budget Commission.....	38
Summary	38
Table 1: Recommendations	39
Appendix A – Local Budgets and Carryover Balance	42
Appendix B – List of Stakeholders.....	67
Appendix C – Materials reviewed	70
Appendix D – Topics Discussion.....	73
Appendix E – Erie County Common Pleas Court Financial Review.....	109
Appendix F – Erie County School District Review.....	115
Appendix G – Insurance Data Review.....	117
Appendix H – Shores and Islands Destination Development Grant.....	126
Appendix I – Related Studies.....	130

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Following the 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic, property valuations and their subsequent property taxes have seen a sharp increase for Erie County residents and businesses. Growing property taxes and their impact on locals have triggered this review with a goal to examine all government-funded services across Erie County and help determine greater efficiencies and cost savings in order to lower the required millage for funding local government and reduce property taxes. The committee spoke with elected officials, local governments and industry experts to review the services and elicit recommendations on possible opportunities to work together and reduce the overall tax impacts across the county. The burden of costs are not intended to be handed from one entity to another in this report. Instead, the Commission was tasked with lowering the overall tax burden on local entities through cooperation and improvement of existing services.

Through the development of the study, the Commission solicited current practices for cost saving concepts. Numerous organizations highlighted work they are already completing to help reduce cost burdens and ensure public funds are being used effectively. Notable savings included organizations utilizing purchasing policies through State sources and local vendors for competitive pricing, and joint purchasing and mutual aid for first responders. The local school districts utilize the Huron-Erie School Employee Insurance Association (HESE) and the Northern Ohio Education Computer Association (NOECA) to help reduce insurance and technology costs, respectively. While these examples are just a few that local staff are undertaking to lower cost burdens, the Commission worked to address operational silos and pursue collaborations to find opportunities for additional savings.

The cost saving strategies that are recommended by this committee range from short term implementations to large scale considerations of services. Significant recommendations developed for government services include health insurance, local courts, water and sewer, education, and economic development, while minor recommendations were made for topics including information technology, purchasing, fire and police services, and roadway infrastructure. The Commission also reviewed current practices with public transit, local libraries and the Erie MetroParks, and had no recommendations for additional cost-savings based on current practices. In addition, the study advocates policies and practices that may not directly reduce property taxes, but encourage services continue to perform at high levels of efficiency. Overall, the purpose of this analysis is meant to serve as a guiding document on local actions for clearer government spending.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

The Blue Ribbon Commission was established by the Erie County Commissioners, and members were chosen for their diverse backgrounds. The seven member Commission was tasked with identifying redundancies, inefficiencies, and areas where local governments could collaborate. Committee members are as follows:

Jeff Krabill (Co-Chair) - Mr. Krabill serves as a current Sandusky City Commissioner and has a background in marketing and advertising where he worked for 35 years. He previously served on the Sandusky City Board of Education for 18 years.

Mike Parker (Co-Chair) – Mr. Parker is a current Oxford Township Trustee with 17 years of experience. Mr. Parker is retired and brings a 36 year background in nuclear power engineering, maintenance, operations and security from Davis-Besse Nuclear Power Plant. Before working in nuclear power, he worked for more than 8 years for the Erie County Engineer in the highway department and engineer’s office. Mr. Parker currently serves as President of the Erie County Township Association.

Karen Balconi Ghezzi - Ms. Balconi Ghezzi previously worked as the Executive Director of Jobs and Family Services for Erie County for 13 years, with 31 years total in the department. Ms. Balconi Ghezzi has been a member of the Erie County Metropolitan Housing Authority since 2012, and initiated the creation of the Erie County Fraud Task Force that she headed until her retirement. Ms. Balconi Ghezzi is also a licensed attorney and still works as a consultant at a northern Ohio law firm.

Tom Forster - Mr. Forster is a lifelong resident of Erie County. He previously owned an insurance business for numerous years, and is currently working as a consultant for healthcare insurance. Mr. Forster has served on numerous boards in the area, including Erie County Chamber, Huron Chamber, Firelands Hospital, Bellevue Hospital, and Third National Bank Board.

Kelly Moon - Mr. Moon served as the Mayor of Berlin Heights for 24 years. He previously worked as the Plant Manager for ICI Paints for 31 years and is currently in his 16th year as a Commissioner on the Veterans Service Commission.

Lisa Crescimano - Ms. Crescimano began in the public sector serving numerous public service jobs, including Perkins Township Fiscal Officer, CFO at the Lorain Public Library System, Treasurer of Perkins School District, Interim Treasurer of Perrysburg and Ravenna Schools, CFO of the Alcohol, Drug Addiction, Mental Health Services Board. She currently serves on various local boards.

Tom Tucker - Mr. Tucker was a teacher for 25 years and also served in leadership roles for the teacher’s union. Mr. Tucker moved into the role of Principal, Assistant Superintendent and then Sandusky City

Schools Superintendent before moving back to Lorain to serve as Superintendent where he retired. Currently, Mr. Tucker is an Instructor with Cleveland State University and serves on various local boards.

PROPERTY TAXES IN ERIE COUNTY

The Blue Ribbon Commission's first public session featured a presentation from Treasurer Caleb Stidham on property taxation. Treasurer Stidham explained the state law that governs the property tax system in Ohio. He provided the Commission with a detailed explanation of how taxes are calculated and why they are going up for many residents.

As a brief overview of that presentation, there are two inputs into one's property tax bill: value of the property and the taxation rate. Property owners are taxed at their assessed value, which is 35% of their appraised value. The appraised value is determined by the county auditor in accordance with state law. The taxation rate comes in the form of millage, or a mill, which represents one dollar per \$1,000 of assessed value. The Ohio Constitution allows for an unvoted rate of 10 mills, or \$10 owed per \$1,000 of assessed value. Any further increase in one's tax rate comes from taxing entities seeking a levy at the ballot box, and citizens in that entity's jurisdiction voting for the levy.

To prevent residents from paying more as the value of their property goes up, Ohio lawmakers sought to make voted-on millage anti-inflationary. That means when a levy is placed on the ballot and passes, the sum generated from that levy never increases after the first year it's placed on the tax bills. In other words, taxing entities must go to the ballot to increase their revenue from voted-upon property taxes.

However, school districts are guaranteed a certain level of operating funds although their funds are outside millage and considered anti-inflationary. The original intent was to assist districts which historically had difficulty in passing new operating levies, but districts have now begun negating the protections against inflationary property tax increases through strategies to reduce their effective operating millage to the guaranteed floor. Approximately 75% of districts in the state take advantage of legislative options to bypass inflationary protections. That includes all districts in Erie County, except for Sandusky City Schools and Perkins Local School District.

In 2024, the county auditor's office completed the state-mandated revaluation process. On average, residential property values increased just over 25%. Because of the withering away of Ohio's inflationary protections, as well as the inflationary growth on the original unvoted tax rate of 10 mills, Erie County property owners saw a collective tax increase of over \$10 million per year.

Treasurer Stidham explained that while the system that state lawmakers designed allows for unvoted increases, there are steps local communities can take to prevent tax increases and even create tax reduction.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT PLAN

In order to determine best courses of actions for examination of tax reducing strategies for local property values, the Committee began by developing a public involvement strategy to solicit feedback on current practices and understandings of operations of local government entities. The Commission began in January by inviting elected officials from the municipalities and school districts to participate in open houses around the county, soliciting feedback on tax savings strategies. Meetings were held at the Ritter Public Library, Groton Township Hall, Huron Public Library and downtown Erie County office building. The meetings and their content are detailed below:

Ritter Public Library, Vermilion (January 21st)

The first meeting was held in a conference room at the Ritter Public Library. Attendees and commission members opened the floor to early suggestions and discussion on current government practices. Numerous topics were discussed, including reviewing costs associated with school transportation, county-wide fire and EMS, collective purchasing of equipment, IT coordination, and the Inmate Work Program.

Groton Township Hall, Groton Township (January 28th)

The second meeting reviewed current efforts townships were undertaking to consolidate services and regionalization. Additional consolidations mentioned were permitting and zoning, road patrol services, healthcare consortium, shared fleet maintenance, and regional public transportation.

Huron Public Library, Huron (February 4th)

Public input at the third meeting largely centered on insurance, including health plans and equipment coverage. Additional topics discussed included trash hauling, overall township taxes and efficiency, highway department collaborations and equipment sharing, law enforcement consolidation, and legislative actions regarding existing real estate tax credits programs.

Erie County Offices, Sandusky (February 11th)

The final meeting for the public input tour was held in the Erie County Chambers in downtown Sandusky. Discussion for projects largely centered on public transportation, education, housing, the school districts, public infrastructure and insurance. Attendees were invited to future meetings to explore specific topics further, and shared contact information and the website for the commission.

Date	Meeting Topic	Presenters
February 25th	Insurance	Tris Felix, Cornertone
March 4th	Fire/EMS	Erie County Fire Chiefs
March 11th	Police	Erie County Sheriff and Police Chiefs
March 18th	Purchasing	-
March 25th	Information Technology	Trudy Riddle, JFS; Neil Yuengling, OhioMeansJobs
April 1st	Water and Sewer	Aaron Klein, City of Sandusky; John Rufo, Erie County Department of Environmental Services
April 8th	Public Transportation	James Stacey, STS
April 15th	Education	Dr. James Tatman, Huron City Schools; Dennis Honkala, Ohio Schools Council
April 22nd	Local Courts	-
April 29th	Roads	Eric Dodrill, Erie County Engineer
May 6th	Economic Development	Colleen Gilson, City of Sandusky; Eric Wobser, Greater Sandusky Partnership
May 20th	Public Health, Libraries & Parks	Pete Schade, Erie County Health Department; Diane Taylor, ADAMHS; Rachel Malone, Board of DD; Erie County Library Directors

Following the public meetings, the Committee solicited expert opinion on the following topics: **Insurance, Fire, Police, Purchasing, Information Technology, Roadway Infrastructure, Water & Sewer, Education, Public Transportation, Local Courts, Economic Development, Public Health Resources, Libraries, and Parks.** Recommendations and comments from the hearing sessions were all reviewed, and a list of stakeholders contacted can be found in Appendix B. The Commission conducted follow-up meetings with local leadership and completed data collection to help inform their recommendations below. A working document was maintained through the development of the white paper of the various hearings, recommendations, and data solicited from the public. This document can be found in Appendix D. Through the course of the Blue Ribbon Commission's research and public outreach, additional county challenges were discovered and presented that do not directly impact property tax revenue. While addressing these challenges may not reduce overall property tax burdens, the Blue Ribbon Commission advocates the following as opportunities to improve regional efficiency and collaborations between local entities. The Recommendations for property tax savings and advocacy for efficiency improvements are detailed in the following section.

RECOMMENDATIONS & ADVOCACY

1. Health Insurance

Current System

There is a wide variety of existing health insurance plans based on organizational structure with frequent marketing to different insurance carriers for the best available options. Local school districts are a part of the Huron-Erie School Employee Insurance Association (HESE) group plan, while municipalities are either self-insured or fully-insured. Smaller entities have been burdened by high insurance rates due to low personnel counts and larger claims. In 2023, smaller employers nationally saw an increase in their average health benefit cost per employee of 7.8% compared to 4.2% for larger employers. In 2025, medical plan cost trends are projected to increase by 8% to 11.4% for prescription drugs.

Recommendation 1.1: Captive Insurance Model

Narrative

A challenge for smaller entities, including our local villages and townships is for affordable health insurance plans due to low census counts and large claims. Health insurance rates operate at economies of scale, and cost savings can be secured by increasing the pool of covered lives and spreading the impact of large claims. Success in savings have been found in various health plan strategies, including Captive Insurance, Associated Health Plans, Consortiums and Self-Insurance Plans. A medical stop-loss captive is an alternative-risk financing structure that allows individual participating taxing authorities the ability to share in the funding of high- cost medical claims.

Advantages:

- Economies of scale ensures competitive rates
- Stabilize and manage large claims across entities
- Members participate in profits
- Tailored solution to meet variety of needs
- Ability to negotiate local contracts and rates

Challenges:

- Requires 3+ years to obtain stability in managing costs and claims
- Requires consistent buy-in from senior leadership
- Needs consistent community support or mutual aid from members

There is a variety of insurance structures that could be tailored based on the needs of local entities, with the Captive Insurance model being recognized as providing cost control and risk stability. Studies have shown companies with captive insurance models saved \$310 in per employee per month health plan costs compared to fully insured projections. Overall, total savings by the various local governments of a group insurance plan are hard to quantify without further data. A Feasibility Study reviewing census data, participating jurisdictions, and enrollment numbers would detail what programs and cost savings are available. An organized group plan provides the opportunity to stabilize and manage large claims throughout the system. In addition, this creates greater predictability of losses and creates opportunities for members to directly negotiate local healthcare rates. The Commission has begun research on a larger Health Insurance Plan and requested information from various taxing authorities to complete the preliminary study to determine any possible cost savings. The requested information and captive model information can be found in Appendix G.

2. Local Courts

Current System

Erie County currently operates with four Common Pleas judges. The fourth judge was established through state legislative action in 2004, with the first term commencing on January 1, 2005. This addition was implemented to address the increasing caseloads and demands at that time. Currently, each judge maintains an independently managed courtroom with their own schedule of cases, dedicated staff and administrative support personnel.

There is no set administrative structure overseeing the court as a whole; instead, each judge is responsible for the internal operations of their courtroom, including scheduling, case management, and workflow procedures. This operational model allows for flexibility but can result in variation across courtrooms and potential duplication of administrative functions.

The Juvenile Court operates as a separate entity within the county's judicial system and functions independently as the clerk of its own court. It employs approximately 80 staff members who support both the Juvenile Detention Center and the Community Corrections Facility (CCF). The CCF, which provides rehabilitative services for youth, is primarily funded through a grant from the Ohio Department of Youth Services and operates on an annual budget of approximately \$3 million.

Recommendation 2.1: Petition General Assembly to reduce number of Erie County Commons Pleas Judges from 4 to 3

Narrative

Erie County Common Pleas judges and courts were reviewed for savings and efficiencies. Costs for the fourth judge and court system were reviewed based on 2005 Ohio State Legislature adding a fourth Judge for Erie County Commons Pleas Court. The Blue Ribbon Commission reviewed the court system budget in comparison to yearly court cases since 2000, noting a steady increase in court costs annually (see Appendix E). Estimates for the fourth judge costs were \$700,000. However, recent trends show a consistent reduction in docket size, raising the question of whether current demand supports maintaining all four positions.

Advantages:	Cost saving through caseload trends Administrative efficiency Better use of public resources
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Challenges:	None noted
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Cost Saving Opportunities

Approximately \$700,000

Reducing the number of Common Pleas judges from four to three could represent a significant cost-saving measure for Erie County, particularly in light of decreasing caseloads and sustained staffing levels. The fourth judgeship, established through Ohio State Legislature in 2005, was justified by increasing case volume at the time. However, recent trends show a consistent reduction in docket size, raising the question of whether current demand supports maintaining all four positions.

Recommendation 2.2: Coordinate Shared Services, Staff and Practices in Erie County Common Pleas Courts

Narrative

The local court system's administrative processes lack centralized organization, creating redundancies for staff across the departments (e.g., mailers for jury notices). Court representatives noted savings through attrition, where job openings are reviewed for whether the role can be absorbed internally or if it would be best to fill the position.

Advantages: Cost saving through attrition
 Eliminating redundancies
 Service continuity despite downsizing

Challenges: Need for cross-training

Cost Saving Opportunities

\$ TBD

Erie County's Common Pleas Court currently operates with four judges, each supported by independently managed staff and administrative procedures. A strategic reduction of one judicial position, combined with the consolidation of administrative staff across the remaining judges, could result in meaningful cost savings without significantly impacting court performance. Savings would be achieved by eliminating redundant administrative roles, such as multiple bailiffs, administrative staff, and clerks.

2.3 Support State Legislation and Enforcement for Fraud Reduction

Benefits fraud is a state and federal issue with significant local impacts. In Erie County alone there is over \$1 million dollars in identified benefits fraud occurring annually as a result of people taking advantage of critical resources like SNAP and Medicaid. The abuse of SSI status, which has always been deemed a short term aid for individuals to rely upon as they recover from illness or injuries and while they are seeking employment has become an escape from personal responsibility for many citizens. Erie County has worked to address fraud, establishing a Fraud Task Force and encouraging citizen reporting to help lower the impact it has on these programs. However, state and federal legislation has failed to respond to systemic abuses statewide, thus placing heavy costs on taxpayers. The Blue Ribbon Commission encourages additional legislation and enforcement of fraud reduction on the state and federal level.

3. Water and Sewer Infrastructure

Current System

Erie County currently has six separate water departments, including the County, Sandusky, Huron, Vermilion, the Village of Kelleys Island and Milan. Erie County contracts water and sewer services through Sandusky and Huron. The systems cover the entirety of the county.

Recommendation 3.1: Feasibility Study for Water and Sewer Regionalization

Narrative

Erie County sewer and water departments are satisfied with their system capacities currently. However, long-term planning remains a priority in Erie County, as future development could be impacted by capacity in certain areas. Erie County and the City of Sandusky primarily utilize in-house personnel for system maintenance, ensuring efficiency and responsiveness. The Village of Milan uses a combination of in-house staff and outsourced services for both maintenance and infrastructure improvements, allowing flexibility in addressing system needs. Intradepartmental cross-training efforts are ongoing, creating workforce flexibility and operational efficiency. The Blue Ribbon Commission believes that due to high costs of water and sewer infrastructure and staffing, a further study is warranted to review the feasibility of regionalization. Regionalization will also eliminate a piecemeal approach to development that is dependent on various water and sewer departments with its inherent higher costs.

Advantages	Reduced costs for treatment, infrastructure, maintenance, purchases and labor
	Improved long term infrastructure planning
	Improved reliability of services
	Rate equalization, savings, and stabilization
	More control and consistency over rates, priority of projects, and operational decisions
Challenges	Costs in integration, infrastructure upgrades Staff training

A regionalized sewer and water district presents significant opportunities for cost savings through shared resources, operations, and coordinated infrastructure investment. By consolidating services across multiple jurisdictions, communities can avoid duplicating capital projects, such as multiple treatment plants or pumping stations. Operational costs can be reduced through labor sharing, bulk purchasing, and centralized administration. In addition, regional entities often have improved access to state and federal funding, allowing for lower financing costs and greater grant opportunities. These efficiencies can lead to long term savings while improving service and regulatory compliance. Regionalization projects tend to be lower overall rate costs in future years by growing the customer base and creating rate parity in a single geographic region. Users may expect varying rates of savings based on current water provider. Finally, by simplifying and/or reducing administrative staffs and pricing policies, the public might realize savings on their water/sewer bills. The details on economic impacts of water regionalization can be found in Appendix I.

4. Economic Development

Current System

Economic development is a major priority for public sector entities in Erie County. There are many publicly funded programs and entities devoted to improving the county's economic vibrancy. Erie County has various tools and funding streams to promote economic development. They include: the Erie County Community Improvement Corporation, the Land Reutilization Corporation (Land Bank), and the Erie County Port Authority (which is managed by the Greater Sandusky Partnership). The county also levies a lodging tax at 4%. Half of the collected money supports a bond on the construction of Cedar Point Sports Center & Sports Force. The other half is designated to the Erie County Visitors Bureau, which expends more than \$500,000 on a grant program for tourism-related businesses (See Appendix H). The Visitors Bureau contributes the remaining millions to Shores & Islands Ohio, which promotes tourism in Erie and Ottawa County. Finally, the county also has a planning commission and metropolitan planning organization (MPO) that supports community development, housing programs, and transportation planning. The City of Sandusky also has a planning department, land bank and various grant programs to support economic development in the city. Perkins Township maintains a planning department as well. Various entities in the county have tools such as tax increment financing (TIF) and abatements to incentivize development on a particular parcel.

The business community in Erie County underwent a process of consolidating business advocacy into the Greater Sandusky Partnership (GSP). GSP is made up of the Erie County Chamber of Commerce, the Erie County Economic Development Corporation (ECEDC), Destination Sandusky, the Erie County Port Authority, and other tools. The \$3 million annual budget is approximately one third privately funded, one third publicly funded, and one third funded based on fees generated by entities like the Port Authority. A growing economy is a critical way to support the existing tax base of the county and ease the tax burden on residents. As businesses open and grow and as residential population increases, the tax burden spreads among more taxpayers and lessens the burden on all.

Recommendation 4.1: Realignment of County Economic Development Tools

Narrative

There is currently no long-range countywide economic development plan controlled by elected officials. To fill the gap, the privately controlled GSP is making development plans that are not as transparent as politically controlled organizations. Given the extensive authority and resources available to support economic development in the county government, consideration should be extended to create one unified vision. Just as the business community did with the creation of GSP, county leaders should look to align the various economic organizations of the county into one. Key pillars of economic development

include predictability, transparency, and maximum leverage to entice development. Having one entity with one vision will give potential businesses a one-stop-shop rather than working through various county entities. Currently, businesses may need to meet with county commissioners, county regional planning, the county land bank, the county visitor's bureau, Shores & Islands Ohio, GSP, and any municipal or township leaders to locate or expand in Erie County. There should be a simpler way for the business community to interface with county governments.

Advantages:

- Greater efficiency in running one department rather than several
- More opportunities for economic development
- A competitive advantage compared to competing communities
- Likely ability to reduce personnel costs

Challenges:

- Buy in from various boards in charge of the current entities
- Competing visions for economic development in the county

Cost Saving Opportunities

\$ TBD

Currently, entities in the county spend roughly \$10 million per year on economic development, with more than 60 employees devoted to it across the county. Aligning the visitor's bureau, land bank, regional planning, MPO, and others into one entity, will incur savings through administration, personnel and operations costs reductions.

4.2 Review state funding formulas for lodging tax collected by Ohio counties

The commission sees a need for state legislative action to allow for greater flexibility in the investment of public dollars. For example, the county lodging tax is extraordinarily limited in its application. Currently, there is little room in state law for the county lodging tax to pay for some of the costs of having a tourism-based economy, such as safety services, infrastructure, and economic development. This commission sees value in investing in those areas, which will attract and maintain visitors as well as improve the quality of life for residents. Most importantly, reform could allow local governments to provide sustainable tax relief on residents.

4.3 Regionalization of Planning

This commission notes the extensive costs of planning in public and private entities throughout the county. The cities of Sandusky, Huron and Vermilion, as well as Perkins Township and the Greater Sandusky Partnership, all pay for what can be considered planning services. The Erie Regional Planning Commission is the exact kind of entity that could be a vehicle for regionalization of planning. The planning commission is made up of county officials, as well as representatives from all political subdivisions in the county. Local entities should seek to save costs by utilizing the services of the ERPC whenever possible.

5. Education

Current System

The Blue Ribbon Commission underwent extensive analysis of the public education system in Erie County, with a focus on the local property tax system. In Erie County, public schools (including joint vocational schools (JVS) make up more than 73% of property tax collection. Given the primary charge of the Blue Ribbon Commission, identifying cost saving opportunities is key to reducing the property tax burdens on residents.

At the same time, the public education system is among the most complex in Ohio. School funding is reliant on a blend of federal grants, the state school funding formula, and the property tax system. Each of these funding streams are extraordinarily complex and reliant on policy decisions from state and federal leaders. However, the Commission believes a path forward exists for local reform.

Attached to this report in Appendix F is various information on school district finances and other relevant data from the last decade. Since 2016, public schools in Erie County have lost more than 1,300 students due to a declining children demographic and transfers into charter schools. At the same time, the cost per pupil in public schools in the county and statewide has gone up more than 50%. Also, at the same time, many districts have sought additional funding for school facility renovation/construction. Except for Sandusky City Schools, each of these efforts has failed overwhelmingly.

The path public education in Erie County is headed down is currently unsustainable. Operating costs are increasing as enrollment is declining. Districts are indicating a need for new facilities, which will cost hundreds of millions of new dollars for property taxpayers.

Recommendation 5.1: Feasibility Study on School Consolidation

Narrative

Substantial reform is undoubtedly necessary in public education. Even as the state has invested billions of new dollars in public education, and as property tax law has allowed millions in local unvoted tax increases, public education leaders are still indicating a need for more dollars. This Commission believes that an impartial study from a qualified entity is necessary to provide local leaders with various options. These options could include: consolidation of one or more districts across the county, shared administrative and other services among districts, and/or a path to new facilities for the county's school districts.

The criticisms of this recommendation are likely twofold. First, some will argue that school/local pride is of transcendent importance, and that consolidating school districts will decrease community pride. That criticism may very well be true in some respects. However, residents deserve to know the cost of the current system as opposed to something more efficient. Secondly, some will be hesitant to surrender local control of a district in favor of having a larger district.

The advantages of fewer districts is eliminating duplication, appropriately prioritizing capital needs across the county, and having a more unified vision for public education across the county. The Edison School District was created out of this same discussion. While there was enormous pushback at the time, the merger of Berlin and Milan Schools serves as a shining example of the benefits of consolidations. It should be noted that a feasibility study should flush out various logistical hurdles and potential drawbacks to reform. It may suggest more modest reforms, such as shared administration or other cooperative agreements among districts.

Advantages:	Expert consultants can identify various cost-saving options Consolidation could lead to greater efficiency and shared vision Modest reforms can provide quicker relief to taxpayers
Challenges:	School districts will likely resist substantive reform Students and alumni may resent impact on school pride There is an initial cost to pay for the feasibility study

Cost Saving Opportunities

Feasibility Study to Determine Cost

Immediately, a feasibility study will project costs, but the goal would be for many cost-saving options to be considered by the study and provide meaningful options to school board members.

ADVOCACY

5.2 Develop a public survey to solicit feedback on public education countywide

There are widespread opinions on how schools are funded, the evaluation of their performance, the need for capital upgrades, and the means for paying for such upgrades. A statistically significant survey would provide crucial information for decision makers, namely board of education members throughout the county.

6. Information Technologies

Current System

Local government continues to increase its digital footprint, improving access to information, forms, data and operations of local government. Specific programs can incur large contractual costs due to highly specialized software, including ESRI GIS and CourtView. Other programs and applications can range from online applications to digital file shares, all of which the various departments and organizations around the county utilize at various rates to meet their departments' needs.

Organizations from local municipalities to school districts are typically using either Microsoft 365 vs. Google Workspace for their office applications. Additionally, there are numerous programs used as needed by the various organizations to aid in specific day-to-day operations, including GIS, IWorq permitting, and Adobe creative suites, to name a few.

Recommendation 6.1: Identify Opportunities for In-House Application Development

Narrative

There are a wide range of applications that are licensed by local entities. A comprehensive inventory of applications should be developed, and identify which programs may be able to be reproduced or created in house. Larger software has off-site help desks that have long turnaround times on software fixes, and high costs for specialized programs. Identifying programs that can be tailored to meet the needs of local departments can offset costs and improve efficiency for departments as applications aid in day-to-day operations.

Advantages:

- Reduced licensing costs for replaced applications
- Reduced downtime for in-house resolutions
- Ability to develop applications tailored to specific needs

Challenges:

- High wage and specialized hiring
- Security and software requirements for development
- Cross platform compatibility
- Ongoing maintenance and upkeep of developed programs

Wages and required software may be an upfront cost. However, in-house application development could be used to lower overall licensing and contractual costs. Fixes for software would occur faster due to staffing being in house and tailored to better meet the needs of each department.

Recommendation 6.2: Pursue Shared Software and Licensing

Narrative

There are a wide-range of applications that are licensed by local entities. Agreements for the programs can range from contracts on a per user basis, annual subscriptions, or one-time purchases. For those programs that can be licensed as a subscription, local organizations should look to partner together and secure better pricing on shared software. An example of this exists with the GIS Advisory Board and group contracting for ESRI Mapping Products. Using consistent software and licensing across multiple entities helps with sharing data on similar platforms and ultimately improve data sharing between local organizations, all while decreasing costs by growing the purchasing power of each entity.

Advantages:	Reduced licensing costs
	Increased ability to readily share data across like platforms
Challenges:	Changing fee structures towards per user basis
	Transition to new programs increases the need for education

Cost Saving Opportunities

Estimated 5% to 15%

A list of programs would be required to identify what software is eligible to be shared across entities. This may require user groups or development of authorities to enter into these cooperative contracts. The identified programs may be able to be contracted at a reduced cost and provide a large and ready market for vendors to meet competitive pricing. Estimates from various Group Purchasing Organizations can range from 5% to 15% by negotiating contracts and creating increased buying power.

6.3 Review record retention and encourage conversion to digital storage strategies for local organizations.

One theme identified across the Blue Ribbon Commission public interviews was the challenge of for digital storage. Police departments highlighted large data storage needs based on terabytes of digital evidence collected per investigation (e.g., body camera footage). Other departments noted record retention and indexing as a challenge as they look to move from paper copies to digital file storage. This transition can be a financial burden on local departments. The Blue Ribbon Commission recommends the ongoing conversion to digital strategies, including through third party software or scanning companies. In addition, as the digital footprint of each organization grows, the Commission recommends soliciting for storage solutions that would cover the current and future needs of data storage. One example would be to encourage a local contract with the new Aligned Data Center as it approaches completion in Perkins Township. Alternatively, other state data centers may be considered or increased server software in house to meet the demand for digital storage for all local departments.

6.4 Encourage support for Erie County Cares.

Erie County Cares is a local program serving as a directory for agencies providing essential public health resources in Erie County. The goal of the website is to serve as a first point of contact for existing resources and services, and was highlighted by the Blue Ribbon Commission as an example of a strategy to reduce duplication of efforts for services in Erie County. The Blue Ribbon Commission supports the Erie County Cares program pursuing private funding for the continuation of the website as a positive resource in the community.

7. Purchasing

Current System

Local organizations currently use purchasing policies and coordinators to help guide their purchasing practices. The majority of entities reported utilizing existing state cooperatives and contracts. Purchasing Coordinators noted that local vendors often offer competitive pricing, resulting in better rates than the state, and have maintained positive working relationships. Collaboration among purchasing coordinators has occurred across multiple entities, especially for essential items such as salt and energy. However, most other procurement activities are managed with varying levels of independence.

One future purchase was identified as a possible cost saving in discussion with area representatives. Local organizations will contract out or use in-house staff to provide underbody wash treatments to their vehicle fleets during the winter months to prevent rust and corrosion from roadway salt and other abrasive materials. There is a need for all fleets across Erie County to maintain the chassis of existing equipment based on our winter conditions, and has been an important practice for preventative maintenance for all departments.

Recommendation 7.1: Master Centralized Purchasing List

Narrative

The Erie County Engineer's Office (ECEO) has found success in reaching out to local entities to join their salt purchasing agreement each year, effectively increasing the economies of scale and reducing prices for local entities. This model could be replicated elsewhere for essential annual purchases. Other potential cost-saving categories could include agricultural chemicals, law enforcement supplies, computer hardware and software, copiers, fuels, furniture, energy, and vehicles. Local entities primarily aim to secure the lowest available prices and join purchasing consortiums when feasible to maximize cost savings.

Advantages: Coordinate procurement activities across entities, reduce duplicate purchases, leverage bulk purchasing, and allows for better negotiations, inventory control, easier to budget for planned purchases.

Challenges: Ensuring accurate up-to-date information
Coordination between different entities for urgent purchasing

The purchasing model would be coordinated annually by existing staff to ensure coordination of purchasing across various entities. Developing a master purchase list can result in substantial cost savings by centralizing and organizing procurement efforts. This approach supports bulk purchasing, eliminates duplicate orders, enables stronger negotiations, improves inventory management, strengthens procurement practices, and promotes better budget management.

By utilizing resources such as the Ohio Purchasing Co-op, or developing a listserv to improve communications on purchasing, organizations can access competitive pricing and cooperative contracts that further increase savings. Historical data shows that participation in the Ohio Purchasing Co-op can reduce costs by 10–20% on commonly procured items. Participating entities would be asked to submit an annual listing of purchases made, which will be reviewed to identify common needs and consolidate future purchases.

Implementing this model allows organizations to reduce expenses, improve efficiency throughout the procurement process, and realize both immediate financial benefits and long-term operational improvements.

Recommendation 7.2: Evaluate potential locations for centralized underbody wash system for Equipment

Narrative

A common challenge presented to the Blue Ribbon Commission was fleet maintenance, especially in dealing with roadway salt during the winter months that contribute to corrosion and reduce vehicle lifespans. Third parties are available for washing equipment, but it can be expensive and time consuming for larger fleets. A centralized underbody wash system would provide a service crucial to fleet preventative maintenance. The system would reduce maintenance costs and extend the lifespan of existing equipment, for increased operating hours, reduced capital replacement costs and/or re-sale value.

Advantages:

- Increase lifespan of existing equipment
- Eligibility for wide range of equipment
- Increased resale value for equipment

Challenges:

- Upfront construction cost
- Ongoing Maintenance

Estimated savings would be expected to occur slowly over the lifetime of the underbody wash. Studies suggest that equipment treated with undercarriage washes can increase their lifetime to double their serviceable life. The system would be available to local organizations including highway departments, first responders, public transportation and school districts as an effort to keep their vehicle fleets in good working condition and increase the overall lifespan of equipment. The increased lifespan and subsequent reduced turnover of vehicles would help offset the upfront construction cost, improve preventative maintenance, and eventually reduce overall fleet costs.

ADVOCACY

7.3 Publish an annual listing of purchases made by local entities.

A suggestion by the Blue Ribbon Commission included the annual publishing of local purchases by each entity to help identify shared purchasing opportunities across organizations and increase transparency on spending practices. The annual listing can be done through an annual survey to each local entity, or in-house publishing of purchases to government websites. The Commission encourages the transparent use of local property tax revenue.

8. Fire Services

Current System

Fire departments are highly localized to their specific municipality's needs, ranging from full-time fire departments in Sandusky and Perkins Township to volunteer departments in the rural areas of the county. Currently, all of the departments operate under consistent national standards and medical procedures. In addition, departments have mutual aid in place to respond across the county to ensure national standards to responses are being met. Fire districts have been discussed in the past due to staffing levels at the time, but were not pursued due to increased costs for the district.

A variety of approaches are taken for fleet maintenance of the fire apparatus. Typically, smaller tasks are done in-house by staff, including some preventative maintenance. Large scale issues are taken to local mechanics within the county or to a manufacturer specific vendor. Most large apparatus are tied to a specific vendor who is qualified to maintain the equipment. Sandusky has a fleet maintenance program with mechanics who have the certifications required for specific maintenance tasks and noted positive results in vehicle maintenance. Vermilion Township utilizes a yearly contract, noting savings on the contract versus full time maintenance wages. A shared challenge can be the mileage for larger maintenance issues between the vendors and local departments.

Departments work off national standards for the timeline of replacements, with no consistent timeline across departments. Apparatus can be tied to specific vendors, and certain equipment items like PPE are regularly replaced or moved to the backline as new equipment comes in. Group purchasing occurs as available based on the needs of local departments but can occur intermittently.

Recommendation 8.1: Fleet Maintenance Coordination

Narrative

Maintaining a fleet in good working order is a critical objective for all local fire departments. A variety of strategies have been developed for regular maintenance based on each department's needs and available vendors. Fleet maintenance is crucial to minimizing downtime, preventing future repairs, and optimizing the lifespan of equipment. The Commission recommends coordination which might occur through local mechanics with required certifications to respond to needs in various local departments, or development of a centralized mechanics system with required certifications to respond to fleet needs.

Advantages:	Minimize downtime
	Lower cost on future repairs
	Optimize lifespan of equipment
	Cost sharing opportunity

Challenges:	Required maintenance certifications for specialized equipment Reduced rate contracting for vehicle maintenance versus full time wages Apparatus tied to specific vendors and warranties
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Cost Saving Opportunities

1%-5% Long Term

Staffing and training for an organized fleet maintenance may incur costs up front for additional training, certification, and consolidation for the various vehicle types. However, savings are expected in the long term for local entities on current maintenance budgets, and by organizing a fleet maintenance program that eliminates duplicated services at various county entities for vehicle maintenance.

Recommendation 8.2: Develop Fire Department Replacement Schedule across Departments

Narrative

Alignment of vendors and turnover schedules would aid in aligning purchasing strategies for fire apparatus and equipment. Four steps were identified as benefits to developing a Fire Department Replacement Schedule across all departments in Erie County.

1. Evaluate and update the replacement schedule, reviewing the current equipment lifecycles to ensure timely upgrades, minimize downtime, and maintain operational standards.
2. Complete a Comprehensive Inventory Assessment, auditing existing equipment for aging assets, surplus, and immediate replacement needs.
3. Identify group purchasing opportunities by partnering with other fire departments for better pricing on large-scale high-cost equipment.
4. Implement Equipment Redistribution Practices, extending the useful life of older equipment by reallocating it to lower-volume or support units, maximizing asset utilization while controlling costs.

Advantages:	Coordinated strategic planning for future equipment purchases Access to inventory of nearby departments during equipment downtime Right-sized equipment purchases based on countywide needs Maximized asset utilization for smaller fire districts
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Challenges:	Apparatus tied to vendors and national standards for replacements Administration time for maintaining replacement schedule
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Fire departments already willingly share apparatus during periods of downtime to meet needs, most commonly their ambulances as short-term solutions. Formalizing the process through development of a replacement schedule formalizes the process and provides asset inventory and outlook for strategic budgetary planning. As coordinated replacement schedules align vehicle turnover, purchasing can be aligned to help ensure the best possible sourcing and help align vendors for reduced costs on equipment.

ADVOCACY

8.3 Feasibility of Fire Districts

Staffing and budgets continue to be a challenge in Erie County as demographics continues to age. Smaller townships and village fire departments largely consist of volunteer departments that face challenges with increased call volumes that are primarily emergency medical responses and have seen volunteer numbers declining over the past decade. Mutual/automatic aid fills the gap locally for NFPA standards and standards protocols, but long-term considerations may be worth studying for consolidated fire districts that pool resources and staffing in rural districts.

Previous consolidation studies for fire and EMS services suggest no significant cost savings for fire budgets. Capital costs increase and staffing may offset any potential savings, though some studies suggest savings on operations over the long term. Rather, consolidation has been shown in some studies to improve overall system efficiency and services at a similar existing cost structure. Consolidations have been previously discussed in Erie County, and is worthy of consideration as local departments continue to be challenged with staffing concerns in the southern townships.

8.4 Coordinate with first responders on grant application pooling schedule

Both Fire Services and Police Services have found stronger grant reception when signing on to multiple departments to an application. Grant applications can be a challenge based on funding windows, applications documentation, and administration of grant funding. The Blue Ribbon Commission encourages the development of a grant application pooling schedule, identifying funding opportunities, application windows, and local department contacts to help facilitate timely response to grant applications. Coordination for specific grants can occur through Erie County EMA and/or Erie County Regional Planning as applies to assist in the grant application and administration, based on needs of local first responders.

8.5 Develop comprehensive plan for continued services with North Central EMS

The non-profit North Central EMS is the primary ambulatory services provider for numerous townships in the southern portion of the county. Local fire districts find full staffing for an ambulance at their department to be cost prohibitive versus contracts with North Central EMS. A goal of the Commission is to establish a long-range strategic plan with North Central EMS for continued service as contract negotiations return every three years. The existing service is recognized as a cost savings for residents and critical service in medical emergencies.

9. Police Services

Current System

Numerous law enforcement agencies exist across the county, supporting each other and additional first responders through mutual aid. The Erie County Sheriff's office maintains 98 full-time staff, while Sandusky currently has 48 officers, Perkins Township has 24, Kelleys Island has 2, and Milan 4. Additional departments exist in Bay View, Huron, Vermilion, and Berlin Heights. Castalia previously disbanded its police department and is serviced by the Sheriff's Office. Local law enforcement agencies are willingly work with other departments in response to reducing criminal activity in Erie County, with mutual aid in place to ensure the communities' needs are being met. In the last few years, deployment of Flock Cameras at key intersections in the county have aided these agencies in cooperative policing across jurisdictions.

Recommendation 9.1: Consideration for Continued Consolidation

Narrative

Police departments have been impacted by staffing challenges similar to those faced by Fire Departments, including an aging population and declining local workforce, along with less interest nationwide in police and fire careers. As departments are challenged by reduced staff and local budgets, ballot initiatives for police departments have failed recently, as evidenced by Bay View Village failure to pass an increased police operation levy. An alternative would be to disband smaller departments in favor of hiring deputies from the Erie County Sheriff's Office to offset local departments. Operations and administrative budgets would not be expected to increase while offsetting local village and township wages. Mutual aid between departments still exists in order to ensure events and festivals remain effectively policed.

Advantages: Reduce local municipal budgets for duplicate services

Challenges: Policing challenges are largely localized based on municipality

Cost Saving Opportunities

\$ TBD

Reducing small police departments would lower municipal budgets and levies, with the Erie County Sheriff's Department able to provide replacement services as requested by the villages. Administration and operations budgets would be expected to remain consistent in the Sheriff's Office budget, and on-site substations have worked well as contact points for law enforcement officials and locals, including in Castalia and the townships.

Recommendation 9.2: Investment in Automated License Plate Reader/Cameras (ALPR)

Narrative

Coordination between police departments has resulted in faster response times for arresting criminals. One technology that has aided in this has been the installation of Flock cameras, an Automated License Plate Reader (ALPR) camera that flags license numbers to local police departments for improved response in apprehending suspects. The cameras have been shown to increase crime clearing rates and help local departments resolve conflicts efficiently, reducing officer hours on investigation and outreach and getting them back on the road to address the next set of calls. Erie County sees significant vehicular traffic originating from outside of the county as tourists enter the region, and coordinated responses by local police can offset future crime risks. Continued investment and deployment of the ALPR cameras at key intersections would continue to aid local departments in reducing criminal activity locally.

Advantages:

- Rapid apprehension for police departments
- Increased crime clearing rate of 9.1%
- Less officer hours required for investigations
- Regional access to intelligence

Challenges:

- Up front capital cost
- Annual fee

Cost Saving Opportunities

\$ TBD

Flock Cameras have been shown to improve crime-clearing rates for not only the community they are in but also surrounding communities in the region. The cameras improve regional coordination between departments while lowering overall officer hours that would be required for an investigation. The cameras have an upfront capital cost and annual fees but are largely a technology to help save officer hours towards addressing other core service elements to which police departments respond. The details on impacts of Flock Cameras can be found in Appendix I.

ADVOCACY

9.3 Partner Alcohol, Drug Addiction, and Mental Health Services Board (ADAMHS) with local law enforcement agencies for continued CIT (Crisis Intervention Team) training.

Numerous police chiefs highlighted the challenge of responding to individuals experiencing mental health crises. Through support from the ADAMHS board, the Blue Ribbon Commission encourages continued Crisis Intervention Team training for law enforcement officials to help improve response to individuals experiencing mental health crises.

9.4 Support City of Sandusky law enforcement in revising city charter.

The current city charter hinders the Sandusky Police Department in hiring a fully staffed police department as budgeted based on challenges with their eligibility list. While other departments keep lists open, Sandusky's charter prevents this and it becomes a time intensive hiring process that can take up to 6 months. The Blue Ribbon Committee supports revising the City of Sandusky's Charter to aid the Sandusky Police Department's hiring process.

10. Roadway Infrastructure

Current System

Roadway maintenance and repaving is the responsibility of the ODOT, county, city, village, or township, based on road ownership. Local entities maintain various levels of roadway improvement plans to create a pipeline of projects to complete with available funding. The plans can range from 5-year capital improvement plans to in-house annual project schedules. There is currently limited coordination of these plans between departments.

Equipment is used by all entities at various rates based on the scope and requirements of their projects. Common equipment includes dump trucks and mowers that are frequently used. Other construction equipment used less frequently include graders, mini excavators, and vacuum trucks. Equipment has been shared previously between entities, and contracting occurs for specialty equipment depending on the project.

Recommendation 10.1: Development of 3-5 year Local Plans to Help Coordinate Large Scale Contracts

Narrative

Local entities should be encouraged to develop and submit 3-5 year Capital Improvement Plans to the Erie County Engineer to help coordinate projects and contracting for similar services. The increased cooperation and structure will help align similar projects and determine what funding strategies and resources are available to local entities to help lower overall costs. The plans would be submitted annually to the Engineer's Office for review and coordination, avoiding staff turnover problems in smaller departments to negatively affect a consistent schedule of projects in their pipeline.

Advantages: In House operation and development
 Increased cooperation
 Bulk contracting and mobilization for reduced costs

Challenges: Annual Administration Time

Cost Saving Opportunities

\$ TBD

Short-term savings are not expected from the local plans. However, the ability to coordinate projects across townships and develop funding strategies will offer opportunities for future savings through various routes for infrastructure maintenance and improvement. The Erie County Engineer's

Office can aggregate larger programs of projects with local entities still paying a vendor directly, helping create reduced-costs contracts by growing the economies of scale.

Recommendation 10.2: Joint Purchasing for Equipment

Narrative

Ongoing maintenance of roadway conditions requires capital equipment purchases used at varying rates. The Oxford-Margaretta-Groton (OMG) had found success in reducing costs by jointly purchasing paving equipment and partnering on road projects. Estimates show smaller paving jobs can be completed at 60% of contractor costs that are able to be completed by in-house staff. The joint purchasing reduces individual department's costs and increases access to paving equipment to improve overall roadway reliability.

Advantages: Shared purchasing cost
 Access to specialized equipment for wide variety of tasks

Challenges: Increased hours/runtime on equipment
 Coordination of equipment use
 Administration time

Cost Saving Opportunities

\$5,000 to \$100,000

Equipment purchasing prices can vary based on size and quantity, among other factors. Costs can range from as low as \$3,200 for specific equipment attachments, to over \$500,000 for bulldozers. Joint purchasing would split the costs across multiple entities, reduce the number of duplicated capital items maintained by each department, and help improve in-house resurfacing projects for reduced projects costs.

Recommendation 10.3: Develop Equipment Sharing Program

Narrative

Large capital purchases are common for all various departments as a part of their maintenance and repair operations. Locals frequently loan equipment to others based on the needs of their projects. The development of an equipment rental program that makes available a wide range of equipment to local departments helps to offset the need to purchase additional equipment. Since 2021, Erie County alone has averaged 4.4 shareable equipment purchases at a median cost of \$43,000. While these purchases aid site-specific tasks, development of the equipment rental program may reduce the rate at which new equipment is purchased or might encourage entities to invest in equipment that can be widely used across the county.

Advantages:	Reduced purchasing rates
	Access to specialized equipment for wide variety of tasks
Challenges:	Increased hours/runtime on equipment
	Coordination of equipment use
	Administration time

Cost Saving Opportunities

\$5,000 to \$100,000

As noted in Recommendation 7.2, equipment costs can range from \$3,200 to over \$500,000 based on the item. An equipment share program would help reduce the overall pieces of equipment maintained by the various entities, reducing total purchasing costs as equipment overturn occurs. This would include developing an inventory listing of available equipment pieces, and coordinating scheduling to ensure equipment is available on a per project basis.

ADVOCACY

10.4 Establish quarterly meetings of local road departments to help coordinate projects.

A strategy for improved coordination across entities was to establish quarterly meetings for local highway departments, led by the Erie County Engineer. The forum will help ensure project plans and schedules are aligning and encourage the coordination of projects for improved competitive contracts and reduced overall costs. These meetings would be established along with the 3-5 year plans of projects to check projects for overlap, share best practices, and grow the access to equipment to help ensure roadway projects are being programmed efficiently.

11. Other Services Reviewed

Narrative

The Blue Ribbon Commission sought a comprehensive review of any entity utilizing local tax dollars. While each topic had varying degrees of recommendations, a few additional topics had no specific guidance from the commission following the topic discussions. An overview of the four topics and details discussed is as follows:

Public Health Resources

In Erie County, there are two Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHC), Family Health Services (FHS) and Erie County Health Department. FHS was the first FQHC in Erie County until the health department received the designation in 2015. FHS serves as a safety net for Erie County residents providing a wide range of medical services. Their payor mix is 60% Medicaid, 20% commercial insurance, 15% Medicare, and 5% uninsured. Across FHS' 4 full time locations, they provide approximately \$16,000,000 of care to 18,000 patients annually. The Erie County Health Department has an annual budget of \$24,000,000, with roughly 10% of the total budget coming from levy dollars, and 90% from grant funds, fees, licensing, and permits. The Health Department has seven satellite centers at various community centers, serving approximately 5,000 patients annually. Both of these organizations are critical health resources in Erie County, and should look to reduce the cost burden of operations to the local property tax base when possible. Additional resources were reviewed, including ADAMHS Board, Board of Developmental Disabilities, and Family and Children First Council. These organizations were commended by the Commission for effectively right-sizing their budgets to meet local demand.

Public Transportation

Sandusky Transit Systems (STS) is the primary transit provider in Erie County, offering curb-to-curb services, paratransit, and fixed-routes. The services operate 6 to 7 days a week depending on season, and services the entire county. Since 2020, the transit system has seen a steady increase in ridership while internally reviewing operations to lower overall operations costs. Current funding sources include FTA, city funds, contract revenue, state assistance and farebox funds. In 2023, STS with HDR Engineering completed a SWOT analysis to identify comparable transit systems and strategize continued operations savings. The Blue Ribbon Commission commends STS for their continued efforts in reducing overall tax impacts.

Libraries

Four library systems exist in Erie County, including Berlin-Milan Library, Ritter Public Library in Vermilion, Sandusky Public Library, and Huron Public Library. All four departments receive funding through property tax collections, the Ohio Public Library Fund, and various endowment funds and fees. The Public Library Fund is unique to Ohio provides significant state funding to aid the local systems. These departments

provide a number of community events, and have effectively reduced costs through partnerships with larger library systems. All of the libraries in the county work with Clevnet for physical and digital resources, along with IT support. They also aid local school libraries when feasible. The libraries highlighted a positive ROI on their services and an effective ability to leverage tax dollars.

Erie MetroParks

The Board received responses to the information request from the Erie County MetroParks Board. The MetroParks noted two alternating 5-year levies, for an annual budget of approximately \$2,500,000. The Board also passed a renewal levy in 2024 for continued support of the MetroParks. In addition, Blue Ribbon Commission highlighted partnerships the Board has entered into for numerous community events, outreach, and programming, along with parks infrastructure investments across the county.

THE ROLE OF THE BUDGET COMMISSION

The Erie County Budget Commission performs an annual review of the tax budgets of all taxing entities in the county. Made up of the county auditor, treasurer, and prosecutor, the commission is responsible for authorizing millage to appear on the tax bills for the appropriate jurisdiction. The budget commission serves as a check on local governments that levy property taxes. For entities who do not demonstrate a need for the levies they are seeking to collect, the budget commission has suspended part or all the millage collection for that entity in one calendar year. The budget commission is responsible for preventing excessive carryover balances, annual budget surpluses, and the over-taxation of property taxpayers.

Prominent examples of the Erie County Budget Commission acting include reductions of over \$6 million to the Erie County Board of Developmental Disabilities for the past five years, the \$7.5 million reduction to the Erie County General Fund in calendar year 2025, and the suspension of the expected increase to the Perkins Township Trustees in calendar year 2025. The Erie County Budget Commission is crucial in the context of this entity's mission. As entities save money through the recommendations provided in this document, the budget commission will be the vehicle to deliver tax relief based on the greater efficiencies. This commission's charge is not just to identify ways to save money; the primary objective is seeing those savings returned to taxpayers. Through the leadership of its members, the budget commission is a critical tool for many of the recommendations provided in this report.

SUMMARY

The Blue Ribbon Commission was formed in direct response to the rising property taxes directly impacting Erie County residents and businesses. The Commission set out to review services provided by local entities in an effort to identify areas of cost savings and efficiencies to help ease the tax burden. While the recommendations above are starting points to lower tax bills, they may not be all encompassing of the efforts and opportunities to ensure local tax dollars are being utilized in meaningful ways for county residents. A number of areas will require further study so that more informed decisions making can be made with regards to cost savings. The Commission was insistent in its approach to not simply transfer the burden of costs from one entity to another but worked to form a cooperative conversation with local leaders to identify meaningful opportunities to work together. The recommendations and advocacy detailed above range from easier implementation strategies with lower overall expected savings, to large-scale studies reviewing overall operations and systems for various entities. These same recommendations will be starting points to pursue property tax savings for Erie County residents, requiring stakeholders to effectively communicate, consider organizational reviews, and future leadership to implement these strategies. On the following page, Table 1 breaks down the recommendations by local entity to create a starting point to begin to review internally opportunities for lowering the local property tax burden.

TABLE 1: RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation	Savings	Effort Level	Timeframe	Impacted Entity						
				County	City	Villages	Townships	Emergency Services	School Districts	Other(s)
1.1 Captive Insurance Model	\$\$\$	Hard	5+ Years	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
2.1: Reduce number of Commons Pleas Judges from 4 to 3	\$	Hard	1-5 Years	X						
2.3 Shared Services, Staff, and Practices among Common Please Courts	\$	Medium	< 1 Years	X						
3.1 Examine Water and Sewer Regionalization	\$	Medium	1-5 Years	X	X	X	X			
4.1 Realignment of County Economic Development Tools	-	Hard	5+ Years	X	X					X
5.1 Feasibility Study on School Consolidation	\$	Medium	1-5 Years	X	X	X	X		X	
6.1 In-house Application Development	\$	Hard	1-5 Years	X						
6.2 Pursue Shared Software and Licensing	\$	Easy	1-5 Years	X	X	X	X		X	
7.1 Master Centralized Purchasing List	\$	Medium	< 1 Year	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
7.2 Evaluate potential locations for centralized underbody wash system for Equipment	\$	Medium	1-5 Years	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
8.1 Fleet Maintenance Coordination	\$	Medium	1-5 Years					X		
8.2 Develop Equipment Replacement Schedule	\$	Medium	< 1 Year					X		
9.1 Police Regionalization	\$	Hard	1-5 Years	X	X	X	X	X		
9.2 Investment in ALPR Cameras	\$	Easy	< 1 Year	X	X	X	X	X		
10.1 Development of 3-5 Year Local Plans for project alignment	\$	Medium	1-5 Years	X	X	X	X			
10.2 Joint Purchasing for Capital Equipment	\$	Easy	< 1 Year	X	X	X	X			X
10.3 Develop Equipment Rentals Sharing Program	\$	Easy	< 1 Year	X	X	X	X			X

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