

Blue Ribbon Commission Meeting Minutes

Date: February 11, 2025

Time: 5:00 p.m.

Location: Erie County Office Building Chambers, 247 Columbus Avenue, Sandusky

Welcoming Remarks – Co-Chairman Mike Parker

The meeting was called to order by Co-Chairman Mike Parker. Roll was taken. Mr. Parker acknowledged the absence of Co-Chairman Jeff Krabill, who was on vacation, and welcomed all attendees. A brief overview of the agenda was provided.

Approval of Minutes

A motion to approve the minutes that were distributed electronically was made by Mr. Moon and seconded by Mr. Tucker. The motion carried unanimously.

Short Summary of the Purpose of the Commission

Co-Chairman Mike Parker reiterated the primary mission of the Blue Ribbon Commission is to evaluate opportunities for collaboration among local governments to improve efficiency, reduce costs, and potentially lower taxes. Mr. Parker shared the ideas that presented at previous meetings, including:

- **Insurance** – Identifying potential group purchasing or cost-sharing opportunities
- **Police Services** – Exploring cooperative agreements, shared dispatching, and resource consolidation
- **Fire Services** – Evaluating potential fire districting and resource sharing (e.g., ladder trucks)
- **Procurement** – Reviewing joint purchasing agreements for common supplies and services
- **Streets and Paving** – Investigating collaborative paving and road maintenance programs
- **Education** – Discussing efficiencies in school district operations, transportation, and facility usage
- **Transportation** – Addressing the challenges and potential improvements in public transit
- **Human Resources** – Considering shared HR services to reduce overhead costs

The commission members introduced themselves, providing their backgrounds and areas of expertise.

Mr. Parker shared the website and email of the Blue Ribbon Commission. A Facebook page will be created soon as well. He opened the floor for input and ideas.

Public Comment

Mr. Steve Poggiali (City of Sandusky Commission Member) raised a question regarding previous discussions on transportation and asked whether a county-wide transit levy had been considered to close funding gap. Mr. Poggiali noted the City of Sandusky is currently running a \$1 million deficit in maintaining transit service. He noted that a potential county-wide levy could bridge the financial gap, but concerns were raised about whether rural and suburban residents would support a levy. Mr. Poggiali noted that any potential levy would need to go through the County Commissioners, but currently there has been no formal proposal. He stated a county-wide transit system could benefit commuters, seniors, from the entire county, but feasibility concerns were noted, mostly due to financial constraints.

Perkins Township resident Diane Schaefer stated Perkins Township previously belonged to a statewide insurance consortium, but it was financially disastrous. The Township was left with a \$170,000 liability for unpaid claims, highlighting the risk of pooling with too many unknown variables. **Mr. Tom Forster (Blue Ribbon Commission)** noted that a county-wide health plan may only work for smaller entities, rather than a one-size-fits-all model for every government unit. Mr. Forster did note that economies of scale do work better now versus consortiums in the early 1990's, where it was more for the insurance companies to make a profit. Mr. Parker stated that insurance will be discussed in-depth at the February 25th Blue Ribbon meeting.

An **Erie County resident** suggested that fire districts should be evaluated, but expressed concern that merging departments could reduce response times for rural areas. Mr. Parker noted that Milan, Oxford and Margaretta Townships support the idea of sharing fire equipment, particularly for specialized vehicles that are rarely used, and are reviewing the possibility of a combined Fire District.

Mr. Parker stated that regional policing could help smaller villages afford police coverage. He stated that the Erie County Sheriff's Office is willing to discuss this option of providing deputy services to any municipality that is interested. Mr. Parker noted that the Sheriff will not push this option on any entity. The cost per officer is estimated at \$110,000 per year for a 40-hour workweek.

An **Erie County resident** shared a personal story about how she may have to sell her home due to rising property taxes. Another resident stated that his property taxes have increased by 40% in the last five years, despite being on a fixed income. **Mr. Caleb Stidham (Erie County Treasurer)** pointed out that the property tax crisis is affecting the entire state, not just Erie County, but that is why this Commission was formed, for local governments to take proactive steps to ensure efficient spending, which would bring down property taxes in the long term.

Mr. Jason Dulaney (Perkins School Board) suggested a county-wide school district model, similar to West Virginia and Kentucky, which could eliminate redundant administrative positions and save taxpayers millions. **Perkins Township Resident Mr. Rick Scheel** asked why there are so many School Boards. He noted that in the late 50's many of the schools combined the boards.

Mr. Tucker cautioned against losing local control over education, stating, when you consolidate schools too much, you lose the connection between educators and the community. He mentioned that some districts are still fighting county-wide mergers from many years ago. Mr. Tucker suggested starting with shared transportation and maintenance services, rather than full consolidation, as a first step toward cost savings.

Mr. Scheel asked if the Townships and Cities have been involved in the meeting process. Mr. Parker stated yes, there has been great input and suggestions from cities, townships and villages. Mr. Caleb Stidham, Erie County Treasurer, noted that there were two Sandusky City Commissioners sitting on either side of Mr. Scheel.

Ms. Carrie Beier, Executive Director of the Erie County Board of Developmental Disabilities, stated that transportation is a huge need for the aging population and the clients that she serves. She mentioned a huge need to address transportation because that affects workforce, especially residents who work different shifts. **Mrs. Karen Balconi Ghezzi (Blue Ribbon Commission)** noted the same issue with clients at Job and Family Services. She noted that there are jobs available but if there is no transportation, residents cannot work.

Mr. Poggiali noted that the transportation levy would fund the gap, which could lead to discussions with other entities outside of the city limits. **Mr. Eric Wobser, (Greater Sandusky Partnership)**, added that over 50% of the ridership of the Sandusky Transit is outside the city limits. Ms. Vargo noted that Perkins, Vermilion and Kalahari contribute towards the costs of the transit but there needs to be more of a collaborative effort. Mr. Poggiali stated that he offered the levy as a mere consideration.

Mr. Stidham noted that the reason the Blue Ribbon Commission was created was because the property taxes have put residents in a crisis and could be priced out of their homes. This Commission was created to promote efficiency and reduce the size of government without reducing services. Mr. Stidham believes a levy is the wrong approach because this will increase funds the residents have to pay.

Perkins Township Resident Kathryn Carter proposed converting vacant schools into senior housing, citing the aging population and lack of affordable housing for retirees. However, it was noted that state laws require schools to offer vacant buildings to charter schools first, which complicates redevelopment efforts.

A **Sandusky resident** emphasized the need for better bus shelters, especially in low-income neighborhoods where residents rely on public transit daily. **Ms. Kate Vargo (Sandusky City Commissioner)** confirmed that bus shelters have increased from 5 to 13 but acknowledged that more improvements are needed.

Commission Updates & Next Steps

Mr. Parker noted that today's meeting is the last meeting for general discussion. Next week's meeting will be a work session with the Commission on moving forward with the specific topic

meetings, which are still open to the public. The following are just a few of the topics to be discussed:

Fire Services

- The Commission hopes to meet with any or all Erie County Fire Chiefs to discuss fire service consolidation and shared equipment.

Law Enforcement

- Law enforcement collaboration options will be discussed and encourage any and all law enforcement Chiefs to attend this meeting.

Procurement & Purchasing

- Officials will reach out to townships and cities to explore bulk purchasing agreements and shared services.

Education & School District Review

- A meeting is scheduled for April 15, where school district representatives will be invited to discuss efficiencies in transportation, administration, and facilities.

Adjournment

With no further business to discuss, a motion to adjourn was made by Mr. Forster and seconded by Mr. Moon.

Next Meeting: Scheduled for Tuesday, February 18, 2025 at the Office Building, 247 Columbus Avenue, Sandusky at 10:00 a.m.