

ERIE COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

REGULAR SESSION

THURSDAY, MARCH 14, 2024

ALL PRESENT

President Shenigo called the meeting to order at 9:30 a.m. and opened with the Pledge of Allegiance.

On motion of Mr. Shoffner and second of Mr. Old, Board approves the minutes from the **March 6, 2024 Erie County Commission Meeting**; Roll call: All Aye

First Public Hearing re City of Sandusky Water Rate Increases.

Utilities Director John Rufo stated that the County is composed of six separate water systems: Perkins, Margaretta, Huron East, Huron South, Vermilion and Vermilion West. Erie County does not own and operate a water treatment plant, so it purchases water from other entities, with the City of Sandusky being the largest supplier of water at 74.2%. Erie County also purchases water from the City of Huron (23.6%), Northern Ohio Rural Water (2.1%), and Vermilion (0.1%). Over a five-year average, Erie County purchases 2.193 million CCF of water from the City of Sandusky per year, which equals to approximately 1.64 billion gallons of water per year. John mentioned, in comparison, the County purchases 699,427 CCF from the City of Huron, 61,773 from Northern Ohio Rural Water and 1,671 CCF from the City of Vermilion per year.

Mr. Rufo stated that Erie County recently received a letter from the Sandusky City Manager John Orzech, informing the Erie County Commissioners that the City Commissioners passed an ordinance to increase water and sewer rates. The letter states that, per the Water Purchase Agreement entered into in 2016, all water rate increases to the County will be the same that the City implements to its customers on a percentage basis across all levels of the City's rate structure. Mr. Rufo explained that the County purchases City water on a tier pricing scale and that percentage increase is then passed onto the County.

John mentioned that these extra funds have not been budgeted for and this year we will have to pay an extra \$473,629 more for water. In 2025, the water purchase is increased by another 15%, which equals to \$1,031,529. John noted that due to the Commissioners being more efficient with County funds and lowering the workforce, as needed, DOES will have a positive operating budget of \$1.4 million this year. In 2025, with these increases, the County will only have a surplus of approximately \$614,694, a significant change from this year. These figures also are factoring in salary and benefit increases (3%), supply cost increases (3%) and operating services (2%). Mr. Rufo also noted that DOES has infrastructure that will need maintenance in the years ahead, causing additional expenses that are yet to be known.

Mr. Old asked how many employees are employed in the City Water Department. County Administrator Hank Solowiej stated that, although the City owns its water plant, which would have more employees, they have increased the size of their staff by 25% from the years 2013-2020. Whereas, the County has increased staff by only 7%.

Mr. Shoffner asked the question as to why the City Water Fund has such a small balance. He mentioned that Erie County's Water Fund had \$8 million at the end of 2023. In comparison, the City of Sandusky's Water Fund balance from 2015-2021 was steady at \$5 million, in 2022 the balance dropped to \$2.7 million and in 2024 the reserves are diminished. Erie County saved funds to ensure that the County did not need to borrow funds from the bank for large projects, such as, Bogart Road and Strub Road resurfacing projects.

Hank noted that several of the City's large investments have been paid for out of the Water Fund including: purchase of a freightliner with a boom crane in the amount of \$175,000, \$445,000 to pipe parts supplier Core & Main, \$500,000 toward the Jackson Street Pier Project, Tiffin Avenue pipe realignment project in the amount of \$350,000 and \$180,000 for a study the City completed on the Water Distribution System.

Mr. Old asked Hank when he was made aware of the water increases the City were going to assess on their customers. Hank replied that he was informed by the City Manager on February 7th that these increases would be discussed at their February 12th meeting. It was voted on by the City Commissioners two weeks later. There was no public discussion by the City Commissioners or public hearings.

Northern Ohio Rural Water General Manager, Shawn Tappel, stated that it is very discerning to hear that the City of Sandusky will be increasing their water rates. This increase will affect NORW customers as well. This increase will make it difficult to purchase additional water from Erie County. Mr. Tappel stated that NORW has multiple suppliers they purchase water from at a cheaper rate, the City of Lorain being one of those suppliers. Mr. Tappel mentioned that he understands increases have to happen, but with not much conversation and no notice, it is an issue. Mr. Tappel also mentioned that typical rate increases are 3%, not 15%. He believes that the City should have paid closer attention to their budget.

Resident Chris Wiedle stated that he is a water customer of both the City of Sandusky and Northern Ohio Rural Water. Mr. Wiedle has been watching the City's spending from the Water and Sewer Fund since 2008. Mr. Wiedle believes that this fund is the City's "slush fund." He noted that every project that comes along, has an inordinate amount of money that is being paid for with Water and Sewer Fund monies.

Mr. Wiedle noted a couple of examples of this use of funds: the Jackson Street Pier Project, of which \$500,000 came from the Water and Sewer fund, and the installation of fiber optics from Meigs Street to Columbus Avenue, where City Hall is now. This project was also paid for from the Water and Sewer Fund.

Mr. Wiedle also noted that the City has a lot of debt service to pay off because of the need to borrow money from the bank. The need to borrow wouldn't be an issue if the City had not used the Sewer and Water Fund for non-sewer and water projects. Mr. Wiedle further noted that he hopes the County Commissioners, as the largest purchaser of water from the City, would request a forensic audit to uncover where the water fund money has gone. The City has not provided the County with any indication on where the money has gone and it also seems as if they do not want to provide the citizens with the same information. Mr. Old stated that he inquired having the City of Sandusky Officials attend a Commission Meeting to discuss these rate increases, and was informed that the City would prefer to have a private meeting versus a public meeting.

Mr. Shoffner stated that the decisions the City makes impacts the County. The Water Purchase Agreement states that the County is obligated to purchase a minimum amount of water each year. With that being said, and increases taking place, Mr. Shoffner questioned that maybe it would be in the County's best interest to build its own water treatment plant, which could cost between \$20 million and \$30 million.

Resident Bob Baker asked if there are problems with residents being delinquent on their bills and asked if the delinquency could cause the City to have a diminished water fund. Mr. Rufo stated that County employees do everything they can to work with the residents to ensure that their water is not shut off and their bills get paid. John stated that if a customer cannot pay their bill after the assistance, then the amount owed will be certified on the customers' property taxes. Mr. Wiedle noted that, before Hoppers Trailer was torn down, they were \$200,000 behind in their water bill and the City of Sandusky made zero attempt to collect the money and wrote it off.

The Commissioners stated that government should be transparent as possible and are in favor of the idea of requesting a forensic audit be completed to analyze the City of Sandusky's spending. The Commissioners stated it to the citizens to explain why the City is in this situation that will affect everyone in Erie County.

There being no further comments, Mr. Solowiej thanked the citizens who attended the hearing and stated that once the April Commission Meetings are set, the Commissioners can decide when to hold the next public hearing.

Request for Recruitment - Mr. Old asked about the request to hire a Project Engineer at the Engineer's Office. He mentioned that the employee, who resigned, has a P.E. and a P.S. Mr. Farschman's reason for replacing this employee is due to being inadequately staffed to keep up with the normal activities to meet future goals. Mr. Old asked if there are other employees at the Highway Department that have a P.E. and a P.S., with Hank stating, yes, the County Engineer has a P.E., P.S. Mr. Old questioned the need to employ two staff members at the Engineer's Office with the P.E. and P.S. credentials, and believes that Mr. Farschman is capable of doing the work himself. Mr. Old mentioned that the Ohio Engineer's Association requires county engineers to have dual certifications, to ensure that counties are not required to hire additional engineers and surveyors. Therefore, the Commissioners have denied this request.

Equipment Outlay and Request Form - There are two Equipment forms for the Engineer's Office for approval. One is for a Trimble Data Collector and the other is a rear cross conveyor and shoulder conditioner (berm box). Hank noted that the Trimble Data Collector is ten years old and is used to survey property. The Commissioners believe that the data collector is not needed and the surveying can be done a different way. The Cross Conveyor Berm Box will eliminate the need for the road grater, broom and flaggers and is more cost effective. The Commissioners noted this piece of equipment may allow the Engineer's Office to sell one of the unnecessary road graters. The Board will approve the Cross Conveyor Berm Box but not the Trimble Data Collector.

On motion of Mr. Shoffner and second of Mr. Old, Board awards bid re **Harmon Road Structure F-408 Replacement to R & I Construction, Inc.**, Tiffin, Ohio, in the amount of \$527,304.00, as the lowest and best bid which meets all specifications and upon the recommendation of the County Engineer; Roll Call: All Aye

On motion of Mr. Shoffner and second of Mr. Old, Board adopts resolution declaring certain items surplus and ordering same to be **discarded or salvaged**; Roll Call: All Aye (#24-84)

On motion of Mr. Shoffner and second of Mr. Old, Board adopts resolution declaring certain Erie County equipment surplus and order same to be sold by **internet auction**; Roll Call: All Aye (#24-85)

On motion of Mr. Shoffner and second of Mr. Old, Board adopts resolution **authorizing payment for services and supplies** provided to: Erie County Clerk of Courts, Global Security Glazing, Treasurer, State of Ohio, Robertson Heating Supply Co., Mathews Ford Sandusky, Inc., and Erie Metropolitan Housing Authority; Roll Call: All Aye (#24-86)

On motion of Mr. Shoffner and second of Mr. Old, Board adopts resolution entering into an agreement with **Coon Restoration & Sealants, Inc.**; Roll Call: All Aye (#24-87 - sealing of the exterior masonry at the JJC - \$58,480.00)

On motion of Mr. Shoffner and second of Mr. Old, Board adopts resolution entering into an agreement with **National Carpet Mill Outlet, Inc.**; Roll Call: All Aye (#24-88 - new carpet and flooring at the EMA Office - \$10,229.90)

On motion of Mr. Shoffner and second of Mr. Old, Board adopts resolution entering into an agreement with **National Carpet Mill Outlet, Inc.**; Roll Call: All Aye (#24-89 - new carpet at the Jail - \$52,997.17)

Board approves Revised Auditor's Certificate for **FTG of Greater Ohio, LLC** in a **decreased** amount of \$2,000 re lease and maintenance on HP E67550 and HP M552 color LaserJet copiers for Sheriff's Office.

Board approves Revised Auditor's Certificate for **Automation Mailing & Shipping Solutions** in an additional amount of \$1,790.00 re rental on the existing postage machine in the Erie County Commissioners' Office expiring October 20, 2024.

Board approves Revised Auditor's Certificate for **Automation Mailing & Shipping Solutions** in an additional amount of \$2,599.32 re rental on the Post Base Pro DS postage machine for Erie County Department of Job and Family Services.

Board approves Revised Auditor's Certificate for **Francotyp-Postalia, Inc.** in an additional amount of \$900.00 re rental on the Post Base Pro DS postage machine at the Erie County Department of Job and Family Services.

Board approves Revised Auditor's Certificate for **MediCare** in an additional amount of \$50,000 re providing staffing support services for The Meadows at Osborn Park.

Board approves Equipment Outlay and Request Form for **Engineer's Office** re Rear Cross Conveyor & Shoulder conditioner (berm box) in the amount of \$23,900.00.

Board approves Travel Request form for **Clark Garris**, Human Resources, attending County Loss Control Coordinators Association of Ohio Spring Meeting in Belleville, Ohio, on 3/22/24 at no cost.

Board approves Travel Request Form for **Tim Jonovich**, EMA, attending North Central EMA meeting in Brooklyn Heights, Ohio, on 3/15/24 at no cost.

Board authorizes expenses for **Neil Yingling III, Amber Jenkins and Trudy Riddle**, ECDJFS, attending Ohio Job & Family Directors' Association Annual Training Conference in Columbus, Ohio, on 5/9 and 5/10/24 in an estimated amount of \$754.00.

Board approves **Personnel Action Forms** for the following:

- **DOES** re **Harry Proctor**, Chief Equipment Repair III - Landfill, rate increase due to completion of five years of service effective 3/17/24;
- **Family and Children First Council** re **Tory Yarbo**, Youth Outreach Specialist, rate increase due to successful completion of probation effective 3/25/24;
- **Human Resources** re **Caryn Brown**, from HR Specialist to HR Officer effective 3/17/24;
- **ECDJFS** re **Lori Adams**, Eligibility Specialist 3, rate increase due to completion of ten years of service effective 3/7/24; and **Eula Sanders** from Eligibility Specialist Aide 3 to Telephone Operator 2 effective 3/18/24;
- **ECDJFS** re **Gil Vaughn**, Youth Career Coach Specialist, retirement effective 4/2/24;
- **The Meadows at Osborn Park** re **Karsyn Brewer**, full-time STNA, rate increase due to successful completion of probation effective 2/27/24; **Kristina Fuqua**, full-time RN, rate increase due to successful completion of probation effective 3/10/24; **Khalil Holt**, part-time STNA, resignation effective 3/2/24; **Amie Jenkins**, full-time LPN, rate increase due to successful completion of probation effective 3/5/24; **Vincenzo King**, full-time STNA, employment effective 3/4/24; **Leanne Labonte**, full-time LPN, rate increase due to successful completion of probation effective 3/5/24; **Devin Landoll**, full-time STNA, employment effective 3/5/24; **Geneva Morman**, full-time STNA, rate increase due to successful completion of probation effective 3/5/24; **Anita Perry**, full-time STNA, employment effective 3/11/24; **Daniel Seckman**, full-time LPN, rate increase due to successful completion of probation effective 3/5/24; **Maryellen Taylor**, from part-time STNA to full-time STNA effective 3/17/24; **April Webb**, part-time STNA, rate increase due to successful completion of probation effective 3/3/24; **Emma Weller**, new hire full-time STNA, no longer taking a job at The Meadows; and **Aleishsia Wilson**, full-time LPN, resignation effective 2/20/24.

Board approves Job Description re **Human Resource Officer**.

Board approves Request for Recruitment re **Eligibility Specialist Aide 3** for **ECDJFS**.

Board **disapproves** Request for Recruitment re **Project Engineer** for **Engineer's Office**.

On motion of Mr. Old and second of Mr. Shoffner, Board **adjourns** at 10:35 a.m.; Roll Call: All Aye