



LOCAL

Erie County Council designates racism a public health crisis

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Erie County Council on Tuesday approved by a 5-2 vote a resolution declaring racism a public health crisis and expressing their intent to address the health, education, housing and economic disparities existing in Erie County.

Republicans Brian Shank and Scott Rastetter voted against the resolution.

"For too long issues of inequity concerning people of color, especially Black and African Americans have existed in Erie County and across this great nation," Erie County Executive Kathy Dahlkemper said at the outset of the meeting. "And the COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed the disparities for underserved communities. We have seen the impact we can have when my administration and County Council partner on initiatives to make important changes. This resolution would be no exception."

Dahlkemper worked on the resolution with Erie County Council Chairman Andre Horton. She said it is the "first step" in addressing myriad issues facing the Black community.

"It's time for Erie County government to walk the talk, to commit its resources to openly and honestly address racism and to improve health care, safe and affordable housing, well-paying jobs, business ownership opportunities, educational opportunities and more for all residents. In order to effect change, we need to start with positive policy changes and to uphold our mission, vision and values of Erie County government."

Councilwoman Kim Clear said she welcomed the resolution and looked forward to working with the community "not to fight but eliminate the public health crisis that is racism."

Others supporting the resolution were Carl Anderson, Mary Rennie and Ellen Schauerman.

Shank said he believes racism is a real issue in the country, that we've come a long way in addressing it, but there is still a long way to go.

However, on the question of whether racism is a public health crisis, he said, "That's a tough question. It's so multi-layered. ... I'm not a doctor."

Shank also said he did not like some of language in the resolution and felt like he was "being pushed on this."

It was not immediately clear Tuesday evening why Rastetter opposed the resolution. Council amended the original language before the vote.

In other business Tuesday, Council voted 4-3 to buy the building at 210 E. Second St. for \$502,000 to house the Erie County Public Defender's Office. The building is twice the size of the current public defender's office and will allow attorneys to have their own desks and abide by social distancing guidelines during the COVID-19 pandemic. The property also includes parking.

The county has preliminary plans to eventually move the county Operations Department, which is adjacent to the Erie County Voter Registration Office, to the current home of the public defender so that Voter Registration can also expand, which is also needed to accommodate social distancing and the additional employees needed for the canvassing of mail-in ballots.

Council's three Republican members, Ellen Schauerman, Brian Shank and Scott Rastetter voted no. Schauerman said the money would be better used to help businesses affected by the pandemic.

Also Tuesday, council voted to accept an additional \$10.6 million in revenue for the Erie County Department of Health from the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services.

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