

Erie County Taxpayer Newsletter



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From County Executive Chris Collins



I have never been more proud of the residents of Erie County than I was in the days following the crash of Flight 3407. No community could ever expect to deal with a tragedy of this magnitude, and I don't think many communities could handle it as well as ours did. My most sincere prayers and condolences go out to the families and friends of each of the 50 victims.

I cannot thank the first responders enough for their efforts. Especially, the Clarence Center Volunteer Firefighters who were first on the scene. It's nothing short of miraculous that the fire did not spread to neighboring homes, and that no one else on the ground was seriously hurt. I had the privilege to thank them in person, and meet the ladies of the auxiliary who were making sure everyone was fed during the clean up effort. I also owe many thanks to the doctors and nurses at ECMC who were standing by, ready to help victims of the crash, only to get the tragic news that there were no survivors. Thanks to our Erie County Emergency Services Commissioner, Greg Skibitsky, who coordinated the County's overall response to this tragedy. Also, to the Erie County Sheriff's Office, State Police, and FBI for their efforts to secure the crash site. And, special thanks to our County Health Department, for their organization, and swift action in the recovery process. That effort, led by Dr. Anthony Billittier, was expected to take weeks, but only took days. Officials at the local, county, state and federal level worked together seamlessly to handle this emergency. I'd also like to thank Rev. Stan Bratton for his help organizing an interfaith community prayer service.

In the days following the crash, I was proud to see how well our emergency management plan in Erie County was once again carried out during a crisis. I'll never forget the tragedy I witnessed February 12, 2009, and I know many of you never will either. I'll always carry a sense of pride about the way the we pulled together during such dark hours.

Contact the County Executive

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211 Service Useful in Emergency

In the week after the crash of Flight 3407, the 211 call service helped Erie County residents get answers. The 211 center of Western New York fielded more than 1,200 calls over four days. Residents called with mental health concerns, questions regarding their displaced neighbors, concerns about environmental hazards, and some were looking to make donations.

The 15 employees of the 211 center slept on the floor at times to keep the phone lines staffed 24 hours a day. "It's important for something like this, particularly a disaster, that the calls don't go out of the area. We know who to call locally, and are better equipped to help," said Doug Frank, the Executive Director of the Central Referral Service.

The 211 service is funded by NY state, the United Way and the Oishei Foundation. 211 is always available for questions regarding county services.



County Executive Collins meets with Rep. Louise Slaughter and Dave Bissonette, the Clarence Disaster Coordinator, at the Emergency Operations Center in Cheektowaga.

Erie County in International Spotlight Following Crash of Flight 3407

Media outlets from as far away as Japan descended on Western New York in the days following the crash of Continental Flight 3407 in Clarence Center. Erie County Executive Chris Collins, Clarence Supervisor Scott Bylewski, Erie County Emergency Services Commissioner Greg Skibitsky, and Clarence Disaster Coordinator David Bissonette stayed up through the night of the crash, and the following day, making sure the rescue and recovery efforts were on track. Local leaders set up command posts, first at the Clarence Town Hall, and later at the County Emergency Operations Center in Cheektowaga, making sure to keep the public informed with the latest information.

Families of the victims were quickly given refuge in the Cheektowaga Senior Center, and later were moved to a hotel as the recovery mission continued.



Gov. David Paterson met with County Executive Collins, Rep. Chris Lee, Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown and many other local leaders, about the relief efforts following the plane crash.

Commissioners of many Erie County departments were in place at the Emergency Operations Center by early morning on Friday, February 13th. Greg Skibitsky was fighting another fire when he got the call to head to Clarence Center. He, and Public Works Commissioner Jerry Sentsz, coordinated the crews working at the crash site during the clean up efforts. Dr. Anthony Billittier led the D-MORT team in the recovery effort at the site. Personnel Commissioner John Greenan made sure any workers who were needed were directed to the right places. The County Purchasing Director, Vallie Ferraraccio, made sure emergency funding was available as needed, and kept track of the clean up costs. Erie County Sheriff Tim Howard helped coordinate round the clock security at the crash site, where three people were arrested in separate incidents. County Attorney Cheryl Green was on hand to answer any legal questions. Thanks to the efforts of everyone involved, a tragic crisis was handled the best way possible.

Stimulus Package is Good News for Erie County



President Barack Obama's Stimulus Package is paving the way for a major road project here in Erie County. The County will receive **seven million dollars** to help with the cost of resurfacing Maple Road.

Erie County Public Works Commissioner Jerry Sentsz says, "We've worked really hard in anticipation of this stimulus money. Maple Road and other projects are ready to go if more federal money comes in."

Normally, Erie County pays five percent of major road repairs. Commissioner Sentsz says the federal funding for Maple Road will save the County \$350,000. He, and other department heads, are combing through the 400 page stimulus bill to maximize funding opportunities.

Maple Road will be resurfaced from Niagara Falls Boulevard to Sweet Home Road. Bids for the project will open within the next month.

Senator Schumer Brings Medicaid Relief

In 2008, Erie County paid **\$4 million a week** in mandated Medicaid costs. Every dollar of property tax for the entire County went to Medicaid. Senator Chuck Schumer announced that Erie County will receive **\$75 million** from the federal stimulus package to offset the costs of Medicaid over nine fiscal quarters. The federal money will save Erie County **\$641,000 a week**, and will help the County weather the recession. The funding will help provide a cushion from the anticipated drop in sales tax collection. It will also help rebuild the general fund balance, which will improve the County's municipal bond rating, and help lower the cost of long term borrowing.



Coming next issue:

- April is Child Abuse Prevention Month
- What to Expect at Erie County Parks this Spring/Summer

Erie County Leads New York State in Public Assistance Program

Erie County is leading all large districts in New York State when it comes to getting clients who use public assistance to attend work participation programs. In this tough economy, it is vital to help people get back to work as quickly as they can. Erie County's Department of Social Services developed a plan to help those who are struggling the most get back on their feet. Public assistance is not a "free ride", and people who need it are required to take steps to return to the work force as soon as possible.

Many residents who require public assistance have limitations when it comes to daycare and travel, making it harder for them to participate in the work training programs. That's why Erie County created hubs in each area of the City of Buffalo. There are now job training sites and GED classes at four locations; the Bell Center on the west side, the Matt Urban Center on the east side, the South Buffalo Education Center, and the Northwest Community Center in North Buffalo. Having the four different centers makes it easier for clients to attend their mandatory work training programs closer to home. The County also offers bus passes and daycare.

Erie County is working with 400 area businesses to help people move off the public assistance rolls and back to the workforce. Most of these jobs close public assistance cases. There are about 3,000 people in employment training in the County at any given time. The County also holds job fairs twice a month at 290 Main Street in Buffalo.

This program helping people in Erie County is the most successful of its kind in New York State, and is getting recognition around the U.S.

County Customers Find Satisfaction with Sewer Service

The Erie County Division of Sewerage Management conducted a series of surveys to see how customers feel they're performing. Randomly selected ratepayers who had called with complaints about sewer issues in 2008 were surveyed.

The ratepayers indicated their expectations of service were either met or exceeded, and they felt communication was effective during the process.

Customers indicated that safety, quality and efficiency are their top concerns when it comes to sewers. More surveys will be performed to make sure service is consistent, and see if it's improving. If you have a comment or complaint about sewers, you may reach the department at 858-8383.



A group of local artists visit the Rath Building to see their works decorating the hallways.

Lean Six Sigma's "Paper Trail"

Green Belt candidate, and Erie County Senior Services employee, Mary Yoviene, is leading an effort to optimize Copier and Printer usage within the Rath Building.

Mary's project will significantly reduce the overall copying costs in the County. The project is following the Lean Six Sigma methodology, and should be completed by June.

On another note, more County employees started Green Belt training on March 9th. Our nine new Green Belt candidates represent the Department of Health, Social Services, Probation, the Sheriff's Office, DISS, Mental Health, and Environment and Planning.

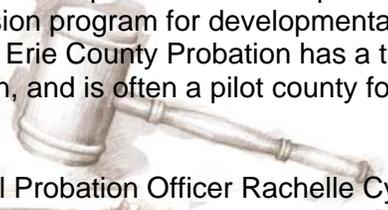
Erie County Probation Turns 100!

April 1st marks the 100th anniversary of the Erie County Probation Department. What started with a single officer in 1909, has grown to a department of 144 people working to protect the community, help offenders rehabilitate, and provide restitution to victims.

Edwin J. Cooley started work as Erie County's first probation officer at a desk in the waiting room of the County Morgue a hundred years ago. Since then, Erie County Probation has become a pioneer in the use of electronic monitoring to supervise parolees. The department also began a supervision program for developmentally disabled offenders. Erie County Probation has a track record of innovation, and is often a pilot county for state wide changes.

In 2008, Principal Probation Officer Rachelle Cybulski was named the Acting Director of Probation. She has been working with Peter Vito, the Commissioner of Central Police Services, to move the Probation Department forward.

The Erie County Probation Department is committed to protecting and serving our community for the next 100 years.



March is Women's History Month

In 1848, the first Women's Rights Convention was held in Seneca Falls, N.Y. That movement eventually resulted in women being able to vote in 1920. To celebrate the courageous women involved in those important efforts, Erie County recognizes March as Women's History Month.



On March 4th, the Association of Business and Professional Women held a luncheon in Lackawanna, celebrating its 75th anniversary. March 12th, Lois Gibbs was a keynote presenter in honor of Women's History month at Buff State. Gibbs founded the Love Canal Homeowners' Association, and acts as Executive Director at the Center for Health, Environment and Justice.

This month, the Erie County Commission on the Status of Women, headed by Susan Sizemore, is lobbying for reforms in domestic violence in Albany. The department recently redeveloped its website, to make it easier for women to find information about domestic violence. Those services are free and confidential. The website is also a central location for information regarding women owned businesses. More information is available at csw.erie.gov.

Erie County Offers Long Term Care Assistance for All Ages

An unexpected injury, or disease, can lead people of any age to need long term care. **Erie County NY Connects** helps anyone in that situation, by providing critical information about the care available, and the best care options. It could mean staying at home with the right services, or finding a care facility for you or your loved one. Any questions will be answered at the Erie County Connects One-Stop Center.

Professionals associated with Erie County Connects are experienced in dealing with the details of individual situations, some of which perhaps sound familiar: "My 10 year old autistic son can be a danger to himself and can't be left alone after school," or, "My daughter now requires a wheelchair. Is there any help paying for a wheelchair ramp to be built at our home?"

Essentially, Erie County Connects is a starting point with one central number to access information for all ages.

Senior Services Commissioner Brenda Ward says, "Everyone expects there are various programs and products to help people maintain independence, as Senior Services is the expert for aging services; but with other age groups, it's often hard to find out who can help, how they can help, and how to pay for it." Donna Andrzejewski of Erie County Connects agrees, "For special needs children, it helps to have experts on your side who are familiar with all the options and systems. It really takes a team approach to achieve optimal results."

To contact **Erie County NY Connects**, call **(716) 858-8526**, e-mail nyconnects@erie.gov, or find more information at www.erie.gov/nyconnects.





Erie County's Commissioner of Veteran's Services, Patrick Welch, congratulates Buffalo City Court Judge Robert Russell, and Veterans' Advocate Jack O'Connor.

Judge Robert Russell Honored for Innovative New Court

Buffalo City Court Judge Robert T. Russell, Jr. was named the "Veterans Advocate of the Year" by the Erie County Department of Veterans' Services. Judge Russell created the first ever Veterans' Treatment Court right here in Buffalo. The court is designed to keep veterans who are non-violent offenders out of jail. Other communities around the County are following Judge Russell's model. He's already trained many courts around the country in the Veterans' Court process.

The Department also honored Jack O'Connor as the "Veterans Advocate of the Month" for the month of March. O'Connor played an instrumental role in implementing the Veterans' Treatment Court.

Erie County to Hold Veterans Suicide Prevention and Health Information Day

The Erie County Veterans Administration will host an informational seminar on March 28th. The session is free and open to the public, and will cover a range of topics such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Veterans Health Care, Education Benefits, and Property Tax Exemption. The meeting will be held at the American Legion Post 264, 60 Main Street, in Tonawanda, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. For more information, please visit:

www.erie.gov/veterans, or call 716-693-4479.



2009 Golf Passes Available at County Courses

In an effort to make it easier for Erie County residents to use the County golf courses, staff members are setting aside days to process permits at convenient locations.

Workers will be available certain days next month at both of the County golf courses. "To improve customer service, we are bringing the golf pass system to you," said Erie County Parks Commissioner James Hornung.

During the 2008 season, the two courses hosted 70,000 rounds of golf, with 1,600 season passes sold. Elma Meadows will proudly unveil a new driving range this spring. The County is willing to hold golf tournaments at either course. For more information, call 858-7037.



Season passes range from \$210-\$420, with special discounts for seniors and youth. Golfers may also download permit applications online at: www.erie.gov/parks. The website contains a complete list of pricing options.

Staff Members will be available:

Grover Cleveland Golf Course
3781 Main St. Amherst, NY 14226
Thursday, March 12- Saturday, March 14
8 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Elma Meadows Golf Course
1711 Girdle Rd. Elma, NY 14059
Thursday, March 19-Saturday, March 21
8 a.m. to 2 p.m.





Graphic Novelist to Speak at Central Library

The Buffalo and Erie County Public Library System, and its partners in the “*Get Graphic! The World in Words and Pictures*” initiative, will host American underground comic book author Harvey Pekar on Saturday, March 28th, at 2:00 p.m. in the Central Library’s Auditorium, at 1 Lafayette Square. Pekar is best known for his autobiographical *American Splendor* which was later made into a critically acclaimed motion picture. Get Graphic is a community-wide two year project designed to introduce teens, parents, librarians and teachers to the exciting and extremely popular literary format of graphic novels. The event, which will be followed by a book signing, is free and open to the public.

New Civil Service announcements with the last filing dates of **March 18, March 23, April 8, and April 9, 2009** are now available on the County’s website. Please see:

<http://www.erie.gov/employment/index.asp>

or call the Erie Co. Civil Service Exam Line at 716-858-8729.

High School Students Voice Concerns to Community Leaders

Groups of students from High Schools all over Western New York met at Clarence High School for a “Rotary Conference for a New Generation” on March 5th. The students spoke with 12 local leaders, including Erie County Executive Chris Collins, Regents Chancellor Robert Bennett, Erie County Sheriff Tim Howard, and Lana Benatovich from the National Federation for Just Communities. More than half of the teens said they’re planning to leave the area after high school, and never come back. They talked about problems finding jobs here, violence, and high taxes. One student said she feels Buffalo is a dying city.

The panel of experts spent three hours trying to change the students’ minds, and let them know there is a future to look forward to here. “I came from the city. New York City. I spent wonderful years there. I’ve lived in Buffalo for 38 years. I’ve never thought of it as a ‘dying city’. We have challenges, but also a beautiful opportunity,” said Benatovich.

Collins said, “There is a bright future for you right here in Erie County. We are on our way back to prosperity.” The County Executive passed out brochures detailing projects and ambitions to revive the Buffalo area. The brochure called “Erie County’s Road to a Bright Future”, is available online at www.erie.gov.

Many of the panelists agreed that there is a misconception about a lack of jobs in the area. They noted many high tech companies are looking for qualified engineers. They’re high paying jobs, and the employers go around the country looking for candidates to fill them.

By the end of the session, many of the teens said they’re willing to consider giving Buffalo a chance. One inner city student told the group, “We need to stick together, and not give up. If we don’t stay here to make Buffalo better, it will be a dying city.”



Panelists speak to the students at the Rotary Conference.