

# Erie County Taxpayer Newsletter



Volume 1, Issue 8

September 2008

## From County Executive Chris Collins



There is no doubt that Erie County taxpayers are facing tough financial times. Erie County is facing its own financial issues as well.

The County's single largest source of revenue, sales tax, is highly sensitive to the economy. A long term economic slowdown could have a negative impact on our budget.

My administration is prepared to deal with these challenges. Just weeks after I took office, I asked each department to cut its discretionary budgets by 25%. Recently, we instituted a hiring freeze and I have asked department heads to evaluate all non-mandated programming.

My administration will continue to focus on controlling and cutting discretionary spending and improving efficiency in government.

## Contact the County Executive

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## Local School Buses Driving 'Clean'

The Erie County Department of Environment and Planning (DEP) has been awarded two Environmental Protection Agency funded grants to support Clean School Buses within Erie County. The grants, totaling almost \$500,000, will provide a cost effective alternative to reducing harmful school bus emissions. Funds will be supplied to eight school districts and one privately owned bus company to purchase diesel retrofits for older, less eco-friendly buses. Over a ten year period, this project will prevent the emission of almost 4,000 lbs of particulate matter, 32,000 lbs of hydrocarbons, 10,000 lbs of carbon monoxide and 52,000 lbs of carbon dioxide.



The DEP continues to research grant opportunities to ensure that one day all school buses within Erie County will contribute to a healthier environment.

## Erie County Rejects Statewide Wireless Network

New York State recently audited Erie County's decision to withdraw from the Statewide Wireless Network (SWN) system. Its findings showed that not only did Erie County make the correct decision, but that other counties across the State may want to use the same decision making criteria.

Erie County chose to withdraw as a full partner, and sign on as a 'gateway' partner instead. As a gateway partner, Erie County's emergency services personnel and volunteers can continue to operate day-to-day on the upgraded 400 MHz system, while effectively and rapidly linking into the SWN during a true statewide emergency.

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## Six Sigma Update

The Six Sigma program is currently working on 12 different initiatives throughout the County under the direction of Deputy County Executive Al Hammonds. Shaun Hughes, a Six Sigma Green Belt and Department of Social Services employee, is currently supervising one of these programs. Hughes is focusing on the application, interview and write-up processes for the Food Stamps, Medicaid and Temporary Assistance programs.

Hughes and her team are focusing on workload distribution, employee capacity and utilization. Their goal is to reduce the amount of overtime, which has increased by \$400,000 since 2005. The team is currently on track to save the County \$96,000 when the project is completed.

# News from the Erie County Department of Health (ECDOH)

## WIC Program to be Showcased on National Level

The ECDOH Women Infants and Children (WIC) Breastfeeding Peer Counselor program has been recognized as one of the most innovative programs in New York State. As a result, the WIC Breastfeeding Coordinator, Sue Leisner, RD, IBCLC, RLC, will be presenting and

profiling the ECDOH WIC program at the National WIC Association's Breastfeeding and Nutrition Conference in Kentucky. The ECDOH WIC Peer Counseling Program is one of only four Peer Counselor Programs chosen for this honor.



The ECDOH WIC program is a special supplemental food program that provides nutrition education and foods, such as milk, juice, cereal, vegetables, fruits and other items to low income pregnant or breastfeeding women, infants and children up to age five. A major component of this program is the Breastfeeding Peer Counselor Program, which strives to increase breastfeeding rates among WIC recipients.

## Programs Collaborate to Increase Outreach and Testing

Two county programs have teamed together to prevent the spread of Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs). The Community Wellness program has teamed up with the STD clinic to encourage as many people as they can to get tested for a variety of STDs. The STD clinic has developed stream-lined testing methods which enable staff to provide more services to more individuals on any given day. These activities have contributed to an increase of 36% in visits to the STD clinic from July 2007 to July of 2008. Increasing visits to the STD clinic allows for testing and treatment of more individuals infected with an STD thereby decreasing the spread of infections in the community.

## Dr. LeVaughn Announced as Deputy Chief Medical Examiner

The ECDOH has announced the appointment of Dr. Mark LeVaughn as Deputy Chief Medical Examiner. Dr. LeVaughn is originally from Steubenville, Ohio and received his medical degree from the University of Tennessee College of Medicine in Memphis. He completed his pathology residency at West Virginia University Health Science Center followed by a fellowship in forensic pathology at the State Medical Examiners Office at the University of Tennessee.

Dr. LeVaughn is Board certified in both anatomic and forensic pathology and is a member of the National Association of Medical Examiners. He served as the Western Kentucky Regional Medical Examiner for the Kentucky State Medical Examiners Office for 13 years and as the regional medical examiner for numerous county coroners in southern Illinois and southern Indiana for the past 6 years. He served as the medical chairman for the Kentucky Child Abuse Task Force, has presented numerous lectures and co-authored several publications.

Dr. LeVaughn joins three other forensic pathologists at the ECDOH Medical Examiner's Office. The Erie County Medical Examiner's office is located on the campus of the Erie County Medical Center.

## Walks are Healthy Family Fun

Wegman's, the Wellness Institute, the ECDOH and the Erie County Parks Department have teamed together to provide a six week walking program to the residents of Erie County. The Be Active Erie County! Program is a series of free guided walks for all ages in six of the Erie County Parks. Walkers will be able to discover the beauty of the parks throughout the County and take advantage of education and screening opportunities to help improve their health.

Participants will be able to talk with pharmacists and nutritionists, receive free health screenings and information on how to quit smoking and eat well.



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## Real Property Tax Filing Update

Town taxpayers need to be aware of a new filing date for Real Property Tax exemptions.

Beginning in January of 2009 taxpayers must file by March 1st rather than May 1st. Taxpayers who file for STAR, Age Exemptions, Veterans Exemptions, Disability, Agricultural, or Business Investment Exemptions must file or renew their application on or before March 1, 2009.



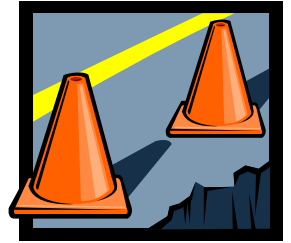
This change will also effect the last day that taxpayers can challenge assessments through the Town Board of Assessment Review. In previous years, the grievance day was set for the first Tuesday in June. Now residents must file a challenge to their assessment by the fourth Tuesday in May, which will be May 26, 2009.

These changes do not apply to the cities of Buffalo, Lackawanna, or Tonawanda. Please contact your local Town or City Assessor's office for more information on how these changes may affect you.

## Department of Public Works Continuing to Improve Roads

The Erie County Department of Public Works (DPW) Highway Maintenance crews have been busy upgrading county infrastructure throughout the summer. This effort will continue through the fall until winter begins.

Many area roads, such as Eckhardt, Jennings, North Davis, Borden, Wolcott and Townline, have been repaired and re-paved. At Ralph Wilson Stadium, drainage improvements were made to alleviate flooding along State Road 20. Zoar Valley Road has been reopened following extensive shoulder repair, culvert and ditch cleaning that was necessary due to a previous road slide.



In addition to all of the completed projects, DPW has 35 open Federal Aid projects. The total value of these projects adds up to over \$100 million. Projects currently underway include Freeman Road Bridge, Wehrle Drive and Como Park Boulevard.

*Continued on pg. 5*

## Boy Scouts Rehabilitate County Cabin

Boy Scout Troop 93 of Clarence recently rebuilt a cabin in the County Forest in Concord. The cabin had previously been badly neglected and slated for demolition.

The Erie County Parks Department, under the direction of Commissioner Jim Hornung, began the rebuilding process by stripping the roof and tearing off the porch. The Boy Scout troop members then finished the roof and applied new shingles and installed new windows. The entire renovation process only cost the County \$34 and is a perfect example of how creative solutions can save tax dollars.

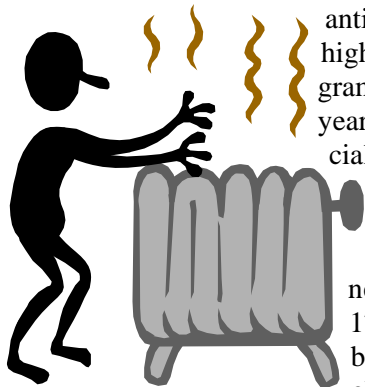


The cabin will now become a warming station for snowmobilers, cross county skiers and hikers throughout the winter months.

*County Executive Collins with members of Scout Troop 93*

## Home Energy Assistance Program

The Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) is a federally funded program designed to help Erie County households with the rising cost of energy. The program is operated by the Department of Social Services in partnership with Senior Services. HEAP provides energy assistance grants to households whose income is below designated income guidelines. Benefits include regular HEAP grants, emergency HEAP grants and emergency furnace repair and replacement grants. During the 2007-2008 HEAP season, over 100,000 benefit payments were issued in Erie County.



Due to the substantial increase in the cost of energy, it is anticipated that there will be a higher than usual demand for program services in the upcoming year. While the program is officially slated to begin on November 3, 2008, Erie County has chosen to utilize an early access period for our most vulnerable households. Over 17,000 applications have already been mailed to Erie County's elderly and disabled populations.

Additional information on the Home Energy Assistance Program is available to Erie County residents by contacting the HEAP Hotline at 858-7870, Monday through Friday, 8:00 am to 5:00 pm.

## County Executive in National Spotlight

County Executive Chris Collins delivered a nationally televised address at the Republican National Convention in Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN. Collins was tapped to speak about reform efforts that are currently underway in Erie County, as well as the reform that is needed in Washington, DC.

When the convention schedule was adjusted, so was the County Executive's speech. In addition to reform, Collins spoke about the role county and local government can play in assisting the recovery effort for the gulf coast hurricane victims.



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effort for the gulf

The County Executive's speech was a great opportunity to let the entire country know about our community. His administration is working hard to bring business principals and real reform to county government.

## Unlock the Mysteries of the Falcon

The Buffalo & Erie County Public Library will celebrate Dashiell Hammett's novel The Maltese Falcon throughout the month of October as part of *The Big Read*.



*The Big Read* is an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), designed to restore reading to the center of American culture. The NEA presents *The Big Read* in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services and in cooperation with Arts Midwest.

Programs include a county-wide "Find the Falcon" contest, a trivia contest for kids, book discussions, a lecture series, film screenings and other programs geared toward families of all ages. Programs will take place in every library and at other locations around Erie County. Visit [www.buffalolib.org/bigread](http://www.buffalolib.org/bigread) for more information.

## Erie County NY Connects

County government has a vital role in long term care services. The Erie County Departments of Social Services, Health, and Senior Services have long worked to achieve a system of services that is driven by consumer need and is well coordinated and cost effective.

These same Erie County departments are now part of a statewide initiative called NY Connects, designed to help people quickly find the service that best assists them, while saving taxpayer dollars.



Locating information that is tailored to each individual's situation is critically important, but can sometimes be confusing or overwhelming. Erie County NY Connects is now the place to start.

Erie County NY Connects can be reached by phone or e-mail. Staff listens carefully to caller's questions, and then gives information that is designed to be as helpful, useful and economical as possible. In all cases the information offered is free of charge, for all ages, unbiased and impartial, a starting point for exploring other options and resources and geared to and focused on each individual person's situation.

To contact Erie County NY Connects, please call 858-8526 or 1-800-396-2705.

## Erie County Ready to Issue Enhanced Drivers Licenses

Erie County Clerk Kathy Hochul announced that the main Auto Bureau Offices in Buffalo and Cheektowaga began issuing Enhanced Drivers Licenses (EDLs) September 16, 2008. The additional proof for border crossings is not required by the federal government until June 2009. EDLs, which take additional time to process and need specific documents, will also be available at most of the smaller satellite offices on a limited basis. The EDLs serve as a NYS Driver's License that will also be accepted as an alternative to a passport for all land and sea travel between the United States, Canada, Mexico, Bermuda and the Caribbean.



Erie County is the largest border county in New York State and it is anticipated that more than 100,000 residents will apply for the EDL since our citizens are accustomed to traveling to and from Canada. This measure will make border crossings easier, faster and more secure.

Anyone interested in applying for the EDL should check the Erie County Clerk's website [www.erie.gov/clerk](http://www.erie.gov/clerk) and click on the Enhanced License icon to obtain the locations where EDL applications can be accepted and what documentation is needed to apply for an EDL.

### Rodriguez Newly Accredited

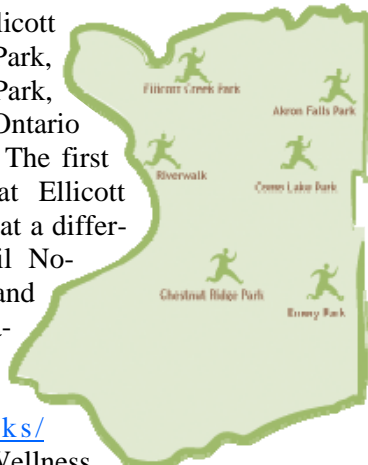
The Erie County Office of Veterans Services is pleased to announce that Sergio Rodriguez, Assistant Service Officer, has become an Accredited Service Officer with the American Legion.



Rodriguez joined the Veterans Services Office in April 2008 and completed the required courses at the American Legion Training session in Fayetteville, New York in August. He is a Marine Corps Veteran who served in Operation Enduring Freedom and is honored to be serving the needs of Erie County Veterans.

*Walks cont'd from pg. 2*

Walks will take place at Ellicott Creek Park, Chestnut Ridge Park, Akron Falls Park, Emery Park, Riverwalk at the foot of Ontario Street and Como Lake Park. The first walk is on September 27 at Ellicott Creek Park, and will continue at a different park every Saturday until November 1. All walks are free and open to the public, but registration is recommended. You can sign up on-line through <http://www.erie.gov/parks/index.asp>, clicking on the Wellness Walks link at the right hand side of the page. Detailed information and a schedule are also available on this site.



*SWN cont'd from pg. 1*

The decision to become a gateway partner does not impact public safety, and in some cases, it ensures proper emergency response in many of the County's rural communities. The administration's decision to become a gateway partner in the SWN accomplishes both of these critical priorities of the County Executive.

The State's audit brought forth recommendations regarding emergency service protocol that the Collins administration is now working to implement, and others that are still under review.

*DPW cont'd from pg. 3*

The Tonawanda Creek Road project, as well as the Parkview Road Bridge, will soon be open to construction bids, further increasing the projects that DPW employees will be working on this fall.

### Coming Next Month...

- Upstate Mandate Relief Commission
- Departmental Updates
- 2009 Budget Update