

Community College Support

Erie's Top Employers: We Need Erie County Community College Now

UPMC Hamot, Erie Insurance Back Plan for ECCC at Board of Education Hearing

When Charles “Boo” Hagerty’s grandfather gave him a pair of treasured cufflinks years ago, he instructed his grandson to wear them only for big occasions.

So last week, Hagerty broke out the cufflinks to speak at the State Board of Education public hearing. There, he represented Erie County’s largest employer, UPMC Hamot, in voicing strong support for establishing a stand-alone community college in Erie.

Hamot isn’t the only major employer backing the plan. Erie Insurance, the Fortune 500 company based in downtown Erie, also vigorously supports the school.

The upshot: Erie County Community College has the solid and vocal backing from two of Erie County’s three largest employers.

Add to that the recent endorsement of the community college by UE Local 506 union at GE Transportation — which rounds out the top three county employers — and it is clear that Erie’s business community sees an urgent need for Erie County to join 14 other communities in the state that benefit from a community college.

Among the others testifying in favor of the community college were the Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership, The Erie Regional Manufacturing Partnership, and several other advocates for Erie County’s manufacturing and small business community.



UPMC Hamot and Erie Insurance are backing the plan.

A huge step forward

Hagerty told the panel that the city has earned a community college through the “great work that Empower Erie has done and all the leaders of the community who have really rallied around each other and said, ‘It’s our turn not because we think you should give us one, but because our community has really earned a community college.’”

Hagerty and Dionne Wallace Oakley, senior vice president for human resources at Erie Insurance, were among 42 speakers who addressed a special committee of the State Board of Education at the Blasco Memorial Library.

The panel will make a recommendation to the full board. Approval would mark a huge step forward for an Erie region that’s looking to establish the state’s 15th stand-alone community college. The closest one is in Butler County, about 100 miles south of the city of Erie.

Hagerty and Oakley spelled out reasons for the Big Two employers’ backing of the community college.

Hagerty, who noted that UPMC Hamot is building a \$111 million, 7-story patient tower, estimates that about 1,000 of the 4,100 UPMC employees in Erie County would love to advance their education. “They have options, no doubt about it. We’re proud of those options we have,” he said.

But Hagerty said the community college is “absolutely” another option that the Erie community needs. Hagerty said the employees say they want a stand-alone community college.

The Hamot Heath Foundation, which supports UPMC Hamot, over the past year has given away \$200,000 in scholarships to employees looking to advance their education. Hagerty is also chief development officer for the foundation.

Erie Insurance Makes the Case

Erie Insurance employs more than 5,100 people, including more than 3,000 based in Erie. About 1,200 employees will work at a new \$135 million office building now under construction in downtown Erie.

Oakley said that Erie Insurance is entirely committed to a “strong and vibrant” Erie, and the community college needs to be a part of that vision.

She made a strong case for the new college:

- A community college is a hand up out of poverty, it’s an opportunity for a productive and fulfilling life, and it’s a way forward for our residents, our businesses and our communities.
- It’s an avenue for training, retraining, certifications and associate’s degrees.
- It can attract new businesses.
- A community college will help Erie Insurance grow and develop its workforce, and enable employees to “take advantage of our tuition reimbursement program. It will help our recruitment efforts as well.”
- Erie Insurance believes that an educational system anchored by a community college provides greater access for those who want to advance their education beyond high school. “They are more

affordable, and serve as a pipeline for those who want to take their learning to an even higher level to one of our community's great universities.”

- With 14 community colleges in the state and the closest one in Butler, why not Erie County? “Why should our citizens, our employees, our neighbors, our children not have the opportunity right here in their own back yard?” she asked.
- The stand-alone community college is an essential part of the plan for a vibrant, growing and vital Erie.

And as Hagerty would undoubtedly agree, approval of the plan would be another great occasion to break out the cufflinks.