

Quick, Timely Reads

Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

Major Reforms Led to New County Government

By: Dr. Judith Lynch
Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
October 2020

ELECTED WOMEN

Following is the fourth in a series of articles about women elected leaders from Erie County written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Judith Lynch. Jefferson Vice President Ben Speggen will host an online interview with Dr. Lynch at noon each Wednesday in October featuring the leaders.

From 1964 – [when Sarah McQuitty left office](#) – until 1974, there were no elected women serving in Erie County or city of Erie government. However, this 10-year dearth came during the tumultuous time of the 1960s and the increasing awareness of inequality in America and the growing awareness of the lack of representation of women in the halls of government. By the middle of the 1970s this tumult had produced a change and, beginning in 1974, an increasing number of women sought and were elected to office.

The coming of women to elected positions in Erie County and the city of Erie was coupled with changes in the structure of government both in the city of Erie in 1959 and the County of Erie in 1976. In 1959, the city of Erie used the Pennsylvania Optional Plan Act to change from the weak-mayor form of government to the strong-mayor form. Charles Williamson was the first mayor of the city of Erie to be elected under the new form of government. In 1976, the voters of Erie County, using Act 62 of 1972 (Pennsylvania's Home Rule Charter and Optional Plans Law), voted to end the commissioner form of government and adopt a strong-mayor form of government for Erie County.

Similar to 1959 in the city of Erie, in 1974, a group of prominent community leaders became convinced that county government could become a more active and farsighted partner in the improvement of the community if the form of

government of the county were changed from what was considered a weak form of administration, the commissioner form, to a strong-mayor form of government. The form of government, which was standard for Pennsylvania's counties, had three county commissioners elected in different elections with the requirement that one of the three be of a different party than the other two. The perceived weakness resulted because of the split in the executive function and therefore appeared structurally unable to furnish the leadership Erie needed.

In 1974, this citizens group persuaded the commissioners to place on the ballot the question of whether the county electors should elect an 11-member study commission to review county government and propose changes to be encompassed in a Home Rule Charter. At this time, there were only four other counties that had gone through this process.



MARY LAMARY

The Home Rule process would follow the required sequence. First, the county commissioners would decide whether the question of an elected study commission would be on the ballot. Once that was decided, then individuals who were interested in serving on the study commission would circulate petitions and file as candidates for the Erie County Government Study Commission.

By spring 1974, all of these steps were completed and in the November 1974 election there were 76 candidates who sought election to the Erie County Government Study Commission. In that election, two women and nine men were elected to fill the eleven positions on the Home Rule Study Commission.

One of these elected women was Mary Lamary. Lamary was a member of the Erie School Board, which at the time of her election in 1971, was immersed in high-interest issues of busing and school integration. Lamary also served on the Human Relations Commission, and in her election to the school board ran on a pro-busing and integrationist platform.

In her successful election in 1971, Lamary, a Democrat, won the six-year term on the Erie School Board by 761 votes, the fewest votes of any of the school board winning candidates. The Republican opposition ran on the “no bus for us” slogan. Also, at issue during the campaign was Superintendent Robert LaPenna, who did not favor the pro-busing plan or the movement toward integration (*Erie PA Times*, 11/3/71).

While Lamary’s stand on busing and integration apparently won approval of the majority of voters in Erie, her comments made later at a National School Directors Convention in December 1973 in California financed by the school district did not. While in California, attending the NBC Tonight Show hosted by Johnny Carson,

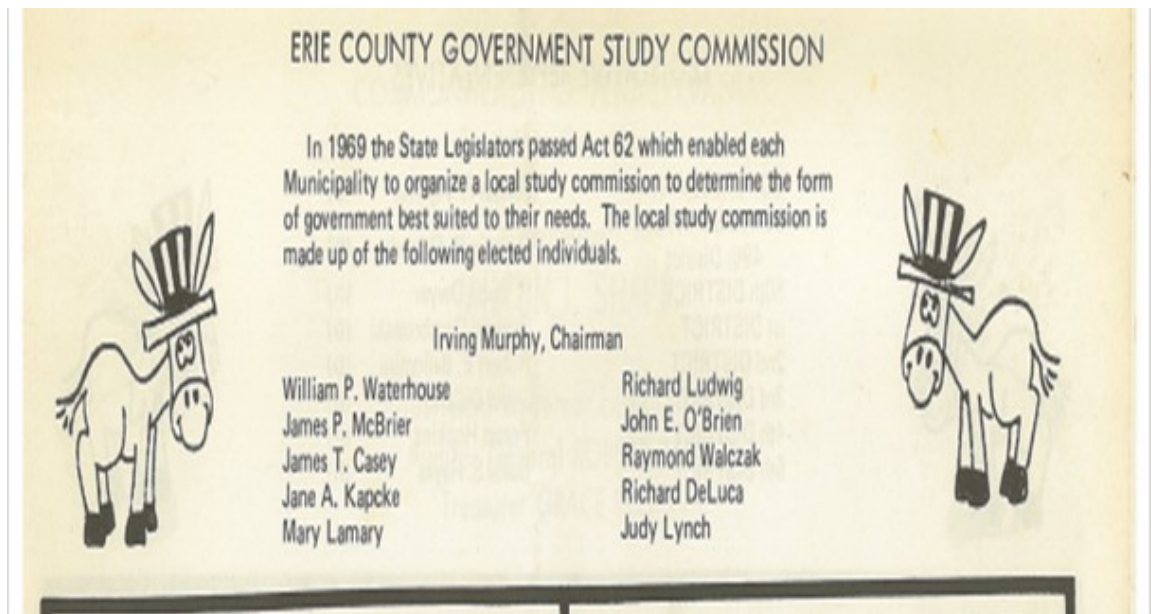
Mary Lamary, as a member of the audience, asked Johnny Carson and guest Jerry Lewis if they knew where the “the mistake on the lake” was?

11 COMMISSIONERS ELECTED 1974	
NAMES	VOTES
Elliott LeFaiver	12,070
Richard A. Foht	11,825
Karl Boyes	11,519
William P. Waterhouse	11,469
Ray Walczak	10,644
James P. McBrier	10,960
James T. Casey	9,345
Mary M. Lamary	9,304
Irving Murphy	8,507
John E. O’Brien	8,498
Judith M. Lynch	8,348
SOURCE: <i>Erie, PA Times</i> , 11/6/1974).	

Carson and Lewis indicated they did not know and Mrs. Lamary gave a clue: “Bob Hope got married there.” “That must have been the mistake,” Carson quipped. “No,” she answered, “It’s Erie Pennsylvania (Thompson, *Erie PA Times*, 4/12/73).

Despite the outcry by city residents, Mary Lamary was elected in 1974 to the Erie County Government Study Commission and was the eighth highest vote-getter among the 11 who were elected.

Although the list of the members of the Erie County Government Study Commission indicates that another woman, Jane Kopcke was elected to the Study Commission. This was not the case. Jane Kopcke did serve on the Commission, but she was not elected to that position



Unfortunately, the initial meetings of the Erie County Government Study

Commission were beset by resignations of some of the elected members. The highest vote-getter in the Erie County Government Study Commission election in 1974 was Elliott LeFaiver. At the first meeting of the Study Commission, LeFaiver was elected president, but then within days resigned from the Commission. LeFaiver had been appointed to a principalship by the Reading Pennsylvania Board of Education. After resigning, LeFaiver nominated Jane Kopcke to fill his seat. Kopcke had placed 12th in the 1974 election, trailing the 11th member to be elected to the commission, Judith Lynch -- the author of this article -- by 48 votes.

Kopcke was well known because of her long-time membership and leadership of the League of Women Voters and the League's support of the Erie County Home Rule Study Commission. She was from North East, where her family operated a men's clothing store located on West Main Street. Kopcke was also active member of the Republican Party. Commission members agreed with the LeFaiver's nomination, believing that Kopcke could ably represent the East county area. Kopcke received the majority support of the Commission at the next meeting and joined the Erie County Government Study Commission as a full member.

In addition, a name that does not appear on the Erie County Government Study Commission insert, but who was elected to the Study Commission in 1974, was Richard Foht. Foht resigned after the first meeting and Richard DeLuca was selected to replace him. DeLuca had originally run for the study Commission and was the 19th highest vote-getter in the 1974 Home Rule Study Commission election.



Also, at that first meeting, the position of chairman of the study commission was transferred from the then-resigned LeFaiver to Irving Olds Murphy. In addition, Lynch was elected Vice Chairman of the Erie County Study Commission.



Judith M. Lynch
803 Chelsea Avenue
Erie, Pa. 16525
October 27, 1974

Dear Committee Person,

I would like to take this opportunity to introduce myself and what I feel is the importance of the Erie County Study Commission.

I have been a RESIDENT, TAXPAYER, AND HOMEOWNER of Erie County for thirteen years. I have an A.B. DEGREE from George Washington University and a M.A. DEGREE from Gannon College. My area of concentration is POLITICAL SCIENCE AND HISTORY. I am currently a TEACHER at Villa Maria Academy. I am a person with a stake in the future of Erie County, for I am a MOTHER OF FOUR daughters, all in the Millcreek Public Schools.

As you know seventy-six people are running for the Erie County Government Study Commission. Eleven of these will be chosen to sit for eighteen months and study proposals for changing the structure of the Erie County government. If the Commission recommends changes and if those are accepted by the electorate, Erie County government could be substantially altered.

I feel that I am qualified for this position and if elected, I would faithfully execute my responsibilities. I am looking forward to serving you and Erie County in this capacity.

Yours truly,

Judith M. Lynch

Lynch was a teacher at the Villa Maria Academy, had four daughters, and a background in government, but was somewhat of a newcomer to politics; although her husband, Terry, was elected in 1973 as chairman of the Millcreek Democratic Party. Convinced by her brother and her husband to run for the Study Commission, Lynch campaigned every day after school, going door to door and joining any group she could find to push her candidacy. Roger Fischer, the Democratic Party chairman, called the Lynch household the night of the election in 1974 and told Lynch she had been elected to the Study Commission, having received sufficient votes to be ranked 11th, or last, in the overall total.

From November 1974 through the next year, the Study Commission met weekly in sites throughout Erie County. Members routinely conveyed information about the study commission discussions to civic organizations, labor unions, business groups, and the public. The study commission members examined alternative forms of government and spoke to various academic experts in local government in addition to former and current elected officials.

The commission concluded that a strong-mayor form of government was preferable and that some of the existing row offices could be consolidated. The Commission's report was officially conveyed to the public in May 1976 with a recommendation that a referendum be held on Nov. 2, 1976 to submit to the qualified electors the question of adopting a Home Rule Charter as prepared by the Erie County Government Study Commission. Immediately, there was the formation of a Vote Yes Committee and a corresponding Vote No Committee. In November 1976, the Vote Yes Committee was successful and the Home Rule Charter was adopted for Erie County.

Vote Yes

erie county charter 76 committee

November 5, 1976

Mrs. Judy Lynch
803 Chelsea Dr.
Erie, PA 16505

Dear Judy:

As Jim Casey said you are fantastic. You not only put forth such a great effort in the Commission work itself, but you carried forward in an exemplary way constantly throughout the Vote Yes campaign.

Somehow Jim Casey forgot the other members of the Committee, but I consider it a great honor to be linked on the team with Judy Lynch! It was a great privilege getting to know you and working with you and I feel the same way about your brother, Mike. He is an outstanding guy in my book.

Best wishes always to you, Terry and those great kids of yours.

Sincerely,



G. David Burton

GDB:vr

P.O. 707 Erie, PA 16512 Telephone: 452-4376

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The new form of Erie County government was to become operational January 1978. In 1977, residents would go through the electoral process and select the County Executive and the seven-member County Council, which was to be elected by districts. The primary held on May 17, 1977 determined the candidates to be considered in the November 1977 election. Among the candidates for County Executive was Republican Robbie Robison, who won the Republican primary for County Executive, defeating Erie County treasurer Neil McLaughlin. Robison was a well-known businessman, the owner of the Yellow Cab Company and the Red Barn restaurants and had the full force of the Vote Yes Committee behind him. Robison went on to win the seat in the November election, defeating Democrat Bob Brabender, a prominent member of Erie City Council.

County Council

First District

Term: two years.

Salary: \$3,500 per year;

Chairman: \$4,000.



LYNCH

BENSON

This question was asked of all candidates for County Council. "What three objectives would you hope to accomplish in your term of office in county government under the new Charter?"

The County is divided into seven Districts of about 38,000 people. This year, the even numbered districts will elect a councilman for a four year term, the odd numbered districts will elect a councilman for a two year term. Hereafter, all terms will be four years. The County Council constitutes the legislative, appropriating and policy determining body of the County.

DEMOCRAT

JUDITH M. LYNCH, 803 Chelsea Ave., Erie. AGE: 39. Lived in area 15 years. Married to James Terrence Lynch. EDUCATION: Attended Allegheny College; A.B. George Washington University. OCCUPATION: Teacher. TRAINING AND EXPERIENCE: U.S. Government Intelligence Analyst; social science teacher, Villa Maria Academy; Community Services Institute, Gannon College. PREVIOUS PUBLIC OFFICES HELD: 1974, Erie County Government Study Commission, vice chairman. CIVIC ACTIVITIES: Co-chairman, Vote Yes Committee in Millcreek. ANSWER TO QUESTION: 1. Draft an administrative code which clearly indicates procedures and lines of authority and responsibility. 2. Implement personnel system based on merit. 3. Review county department organization with possibly a reorganization of departments

Also, a candidate in the primary election for the First District County Council seat, which was essentially Millcreek Township, was Lynch. In the May 1977 Democratic primary for the First District County Council seat, Lynch received 1,343 votes, defeating four contenders, all men: Ralph Madden, who received 520 votes; Tom Karle, who received 831 votes; Charles Foht, who received 467 votes; and Robert S. Corritore, who received 1,340 votes. Lynch won the Democratic Primary for the First District County Council seat by three votes.

The Republican candidate for the first District County Council seat was C. Thomas Benson who ran unopposed in the primary. In November 1977, Lynch squared off against Benson, a Corry resident, and won that contest with 7,592 votes to Benson's 6,056. Lynch thus became the only woman elected to the seven-member County Council.

WE WILL HAVE OUR OWN VOICE ON THE NEW COUNTY COUNCIL

MILLCREEK TOWNSHIP

DID YOU KNOW?

11 NOV 2009
11 AM - 7 PM

YOU VOTED FOR A BETTER GOVERNMENT

JUDY LYNCH

MILLCREEK REPRESENTATIVE TO COUNTY COUNCIL

NOW VOTE FOR A BETTER CANDIDATE

Who Cares about County Govern

Dear Neighbor,

Since I was elected to Count worked hard to make County C effective. I have continually de ments in accounting and persc I have fought for the continua services while seeking reductio budgetary items.

County government is beset wi such as: a serious deficit at the declining state and federal funds and inadequate financial control easy solutions, but if re-elected act responsibly and intelligently the issues.

I seek your support this Nov

Judy L
Erie County

Celebrating her victory that evening, Lynch credited her success to her students at Villa Maria Academy, who were her cheerleaders, along with her four daughters and her husband who was a Democratic committeeman and Chair of the Millcreek Democratic Party and a West Lake Volunteer Fireman and to the many other volunteers, who assisted the largely door-to-door personal-voter contact campaign.

The newly elected County Council was composed of Buzz Andrezeski, Fiore Leone, Gary Bukowski, Ken Wayne, Richard Nygaard, Irving Olds Murphy, and Judy Lynch. The Democrats had a majority of one in the newly elected County Council. At the first meeting of the County Council, Gary Bukowski nominated Judy Lynch as the Council's first Chair.



The first County Council had a very important function. The Charter required council to adopt within six months an Administrative Code, Personnel Code, and operational procedures. Along with the newly elected County Executive, Robbie Robinson, council was also responsible for levying the annual tax rate and adopting the annual budget. For the next year, Lynch, working with County Executive Robinson, the other newly elected members of the council, County department heads, and employees, tackled these requirements.

Sources: Erie Daily Times, Erie Times News,

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Judy Lynch, Ph.D., is a Scholar in Residence at the Jefferson Educational Society. She was named the Jefferson's Decadean Scholar in 2018. She continues to serve on the Jefferson's Board of Trustees and was its first chairwoman. From 2004 to 2017, she served as Associate Professor of Political Science and History at Mercyhurst University. From 2002 to 2004, Dr. Lynch taught at Allegheny College and was part of the Civic Engagement Institute. Prior, she worked as an analyst for the CIA and served for 20 years as Erie County Executive. She received her Doctorate With Distinction in Political Science in 2001 from the University of Pittsburgh and her M.A. in Social Studies from Gannon University. Her undergraduate degree, a B.A. in History and Political Science, is from George Washington University.



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[Women's Political Strength Grows in Three Movements](#) written by
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