

# JEFFERSON

EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## PLAIN ENGLISH

### Former Congressman English Makes Jefferson Debut

By Phil English  
December 2024

*Editor's note: Following is the first of an ongoing Jefferson series by former U.S. Rep. Phil English.*

I love Erie.

Growing up here, I have always loved our community for its human scale. Erie is naturally a walking city where you don't need a car. Its distinctive neighborhoods are laid out, thanks to Pierre Charles L'Enfant, the engineer and architect who designed the city plan and is best known for his layout of Washington, D.C. The city of Erie has good bones, and that has aided its periodic reinvention and revitalization.

Erie offers the observer a panoply of districts and zones, rewarding the attentive with subtle neighborhood and architectural features that reflect its organic growth as a community. In the summer and fall of 1985 I knocked on nearly 10,000 doors in most of these neighborhoods, and I was impressed by the ethnic, social, and economic diversity I encountered. Erie was and is a natural melting pot, bristling with shared history and a distinctive culture.

Our political culture hasn't always risen to the community's potential. That was brought home to me by my father, John English, who served Erie as a lawyer and businessman.

Dad was also involved in business ventures in North Carolina. At the time, the Research Triangle was drawing national attention and investment by reinventing itself in the afterglow of the Civil Rights movement. My dad talked about getting a cab at the airport and having his driver regale him for a half-hour about how great Raleigh was: education, local charities, downtown improvements, jobs. On his return, his Erie cab driver to our home focused the conversation on local negatives and complaints, with a particular emphasis on area politicians. To be fair, in the pre-internet world, a local school director had just been caught at a national conference referring to Erie as "the Mistake on the Lake." Not exactly a Chamber of Commerce talking point.

Now Erie is one of many communities working to reinvent itself in an aging region, a changing commonwealth and a challenging economy. We are necessarily competing with other cities large and small. Our human scale and welcoming culture give us many advantages in this competition. However, our civic leadership and community elan need to rise to the occasion. We need to get our story straight.

When I represented Erie in Congress, I had the opportunity to support local projects and be read in on long-term priorities for our area. I also saw similar advocacy from other communities, some in my district. What was striking was how certain localities united successfully behind a common agenda. Sometimes Erie would come to the table with competing priorities and dissonant demands, with limited understanding of best prospects. There were many fiefdoms, and uneven collaboration. The results were frequently, well, suboptimal.

Don't get me wrong: we have had great leaders, fine ideas, and many accomplishments. Infinite Erie was created for this very reason. Erie is potentially well positioned going forward. And we retain fine support for our iconic nonprofit sector. So, what strategy to build our future? Answer: furthering the common agenda with civic engagement and public support.

We have all the necessary building blocks. For example, while Infinite Erie continues its work, the Erie Regional Chamber has managed targeted programs in Erie Forward and Erie Refocused, grounded in studies by Garner Economics, and aimed at economic development and social priorities. They now await an update.

Meanwhile, post-Covid-19 development efforts have been influenced by Infinite Erie and the Erie Inclusive Recovery Investment Playbook, a study created by national urbanist Bruce Katz that compiles an array of developing transformational projects for Erie that could change local economic geography. In spite of some understandable gaps in detail and a few puzzling omissions, the

playbook is a useful template for assessing local projects. However, the playbook identifies some \$1.3 billion in local investments in the queue, in an environment of inconsistent federal funding, competitive state programming, and strained local tax bases.

Infinite Erie has focused on a variety of encouraging projects. Some of these complement each other and could contribute to a renewed identity and image for Erie: Behrend's Project Resolve, Gannon's Project NePTWN, and the revolutionary plastics recycling initiative of the International Recycling Group all have this potential, for example.

In my view, all of these efforts are at risk of falling short unless Erie's extended community embraces a couple of challenging but attainable and related goals. Erie leaders (as a prominent businessman recently put it) need to "speak with one voice." The community needs to embrace these changes with the positive attitude of Dad's Raleigh cab driver.

Greater Erie has the capacity to show a united front, behind a positive agenda to revitalize our local economy, central business district, and neighborhoods. Our manageable scale makes it possible for us to build the relationships and mutual understanding that allow a respectful discussion of what we need to achieve as a community.

We need to build a consensus in favor of the investments and improvements that foster inclusive economic growth, which requires civic engagement by local networks and taxpayers, reaching across normal local fault lines. This would be a sustained expression of community spirit that isn't imposed from the top down: a movement that overcomes inertia and parochial impulses, and ultimately reinforces political collaboration through the rough and tumble of local elections. This movement would create an element of Erie solidarity in the pursuit of community growth and development consonant with our values, diverse backgrounds, and aspirations.

None of this will be easy, and little of it can be delegated. Some skeptical friends that I propose this to dismiss it (and your humble author) as Pollyannaish. Touché! However, there are precedents. I remember how united our community was when our local favorite Tom Ridge ran for governor, and when Mayor Lou Tullio engaged national and state leaders across partisan divisions. Local festivals, congregations, charities, institutions, and causes generate expressions of profound loyalty and enthusiasm. Local development should be a matter of transcendent pride.

There are other barriers to a development agenda that need to be acknowledged and overcome. One is a basic resistance to change natural in any community in

precarious times, a common challenge for other cities. Another is a “not in my backyard” impulse to insist that a change, regardless of merit, occur elsewhere.

Finally, there is the problem of poisonous national politics: partisan divisions and grievances need to be filtered out of local development advocacy, which will require bipartisan allies and a unified local front. As the presidential election showed, Erie's status as strategic national bellwether community guaranteed our exposure to every divisive message and expression of grievance. We need to regroup, circle our wagons, and find common cause with the winners.

Erie is wonderfully positioned to be an attractive home to a new generation with economic opportunity, social cohesion, vibrant neighborhoods, a superior quality of life, and a sparkling future. That is, if we have the courage and imagination to claim it.

---



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phil English, a lifelong Republican, represented northwestern Pennsylvania in the U.S. House of Representatives for seven terms, serving on the House Ways and Means Committee. He specialized in tax, health care, international trade and safety net policies, serving as Ranking Member on the Select Revenue Subcommittee. He also served on the Joint Economic Committee, and as Chairman of the Congressional Economic Leadership Institute.

He currently serves as co-chairman of the Government Relations Practice Group at ArentFox Schiff LLP, a national law firm, where he advises clients in the healthcare, life sciences, international, energy, higher education, technology, transportation, housing, and nonprofit sectors.

A lifelong resident of Erie's west bayfront neighborhood, English earned a bachelor's degree in Political Science from the University of Pennsylvania, where he recently served as a visiting scholar at the Penn Biden Center.

He can be reached at [philip.english@afslaw.com](mailto:philip.english@afslaw.com).

---

Subscribe to JES Publications  
Mailing List!

Support JES | Donate

## In Case You Missed It

[The Wider World | Lessons from Colombia's 50-Year Civil War](#) written by President of DC Analytics **Diane Chido**

[Truth in Love | Glaude and His 'Masterpiece' in Spotlight Friday](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Parris J. Baker**

[Be Well | 5 Things to Know About A-fib](#) written by health and wellness expert **Debbie DeAngelo**

[Classic Book Notes | The American Way of Christmas: Part One](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Andrew Roth**

[On the Waterfront | Ice Fishing and Bay Rat Adventures](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. David Frew**

Jefferson Educational Society | [jeserie.org](http://jeserie.org)

