

Underground Railroad Task Force Meeting

Tuesday, January 16, 2024 at 10 a.m.
Illinois Department of Natural Resources
1 Natural Resources Way, Springfield, IL

Attending: Task force members: John Ackerman, Jenn Edginton, Dave Joens (via Webex), Senator David Koehler, Larry McClellan, Representative Debbie Meyers-Martin, and Senator Doris Turner; Illinois Department of Natural Resources staff Meghan Lindstrom and Jamie Reynolds; other attendees: Jessica Scaife representing Senator Jil Tracy), Alex Abbeduto (via Webex, with Capital News Illinois), Jennifer Allison (via Webex), Gerald McWorter, Aaron Tebrinke (legislative assistant for Sen. Koehler), and Kate Williams-McWorter.

I. Introduction of Task Force Members

Senator David Koehler called the meeting to order at 10:06 am.

Larry McClellan introduced Gerald McWorter and Kate Williams-McWorter, both professors at the University of Illinois Champaign who have studied the Underground Railroad and New Philadelphia.

II. Motion and Vote to Appoint Chair

John Ackerman moved to name Senator Dave Koehler and Representative Debbie Meyers-Martin as co-chairs of the task force. Larry seconded and the motion passed unanimously.

Representative Debbie Meyers-Martin joined the meeting at 10:09 am.

III. Goals and Outcomes of the Task Force

John shared the origins of the task force. Three years ago, work started in Tazewell county to recognize the gravesites of conductors from the Underground Railroad. That work had since expanded to four more counties. John reached out to Senator Koehler to find a way to spread the work statewide. The plan for the task force expanded further to find a vehicle to connect and empower other groups raising awareness of the Underground Railroad in Illinois.

Senator Doris Turner joined the meeting at 10:17 am.

Senator Koehler invited attendees to speak their hopes for the task force.

Representative Meyers-Martin stated she envisioned that the task force would create more excitement throughout the state for people to learn about the Underground Railroad, which has not been taught to its potential. She is excited about the suggested subcommittee on education and hopes the task force will empower further research on the history and sites of the Underground Railroad. As a long-term goal, she would want a museum created to teach about this subject similar to the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Ohio.

Senator Turner stated she hoped the task force would focus on partnership opportunities. The African American Heritage Museum in Springfield has expressed interest in being a partner. The museum has created a virtual reality exhibit of the African American experience along Route 66 that could be a template for a similar Underground Railroad experience.

Larry clarified that there were two great cycles of stories about the Underground Railroad. The stories

of 'conductors' who provided assistance are the most documented. The stories of freedom seekers have not been as well documented in Illinois and Larry hopes the task force can bring more of their stories forward. He also stated that there are currently around 25 sites around the state designated as Freedom Sites by the National Park Service. He hopes the task force could find ways to connect these sites and find more, of which he has identified 60 possible new sites so far. He shared previous efforts to create a statewide Underground Railroad network and how they were hampered by limitations in communication technology, which has vastly improved and made such a project viable now.

Larry distributed a two-page document titled Freedom Seekers and the Underground Railroad: Reframing the Stories in Illinois.

Gerald hoped that the task force would find ways to better connect existing Underground Railroad sites and institutions with schools. The first step would be to identify existing memory institutions that already document the events, such as museums, libraries, and certain colleges. The next step would be to invite the public to come forward with oral history and personal stories. In particular, the task force would need to work to ensure Black people trust the process so the stories of freedom seekers are well documented.

Jenn Edginton stated this was an opportunity to document oral history since many marginalized people have not had their stories recorded. As Interim Director of the Illinois State Museum System, and with the support and reach of the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), the Museum could help document and share Illinois cultural history throughout the state. Jenn is currently setting up a Field Services Office which could provide training for smaller museums and libraries.

Dave Joens stated that the task force should primarily focus on networking. His office, the State Archives, could provide conservation services for smaller museums if their documentation is in poor shape.

Jamie Reynolds stated that she represents the administrative support that DNR will provide the task force. She believes the institutional knowledge provided by the appointees and expert guests, along with the support of the Museum and DNR, make this a unique opportunity to share the rich history of Illinois with the public.

Senator Koehler stated it is clear there is interest throughout the state to share the story of the Underground Railroad. The challenge of the task force is to harness the existing energy and find ways for people who wish to contribute to have a meaningful means of sharing. Another task is to establish a pathway for ongoing discovery and activities, which could be achieved by recommending the creation of a commission.

Jamie read out the goal of the task force as written in statute. The task force has been given a July 1, 2024 deadline to submit their recommendation to the General Assembly. If the task force determines more time is needed to complete the recommendation, Senator Koehler and Representative Meyers-Martin would work to change the legislation to push the deadline to the end of the calendar year.

Larry recommended that the Underground Railroad work in other states be researched and emulated.

Senator Koehler stated that a press conference had been scheduled for the afternoon to share the task force with the public. It will be the first public declaration of the task force and will be an opportunity

to share the planned subcommittees.

IV. IDNR Recommendation of the Subcommittees and Vote

The task force debated the titles and scope of each subcommittee. The task force settled on four subcommittees:

Cultural Impact for Communities
Education and History
Historical Sites and Landmarks
Communications and Technology

V. Public Involvement and Survey

Jenn stated that the public would be able to find more information on the Underground Railroad Task Force webpage on DNR's website. There would be a survey on the webpage where people can submit their contact information and which subcommittees they would like to join.

John recommended in the future that the state create a unique website for the Underground Railroad, including a map that identifies unique sites and routes.

Gerald recommended that the task force hold a conference to invite the public to contribute. Senator Koehler stated that there was currently no funding to hold a conference but it could be included in the recommendation to the General Assembly.

VI. Closing Remarks

John asked how often the task force would meet. Senator Koehler recommended the task force meet once a month. Senator Turner recommended the subcommittees meet more often.

Senator Koehler recommended that each subcommittee be co-chaired by one task force member and one member of the public.

Larry recommended the subcommittee meetings also be hybrid meetings. Jamie confirmed she could host Webex meetings for the public.

John recommended all task force members and attending subject experts complete Open Meetings Act training. Jamie said she would work with IDNR's Ethics officer to make sure the task force has access to the training.

VII. Next meeting

The task force discussed the date and time of the next meeting and decided on Monday, February 5th at 3 p.m. The meeting would also be a hybrid and online participation would be encouraged for guests due to space limitations.

Jenn asked if there had been any progress in filling the last vacancy on the task force. Senator Turner confirmed she had reached out to the leadership of the NAACP Illinois State Conference. She would check if there had been any progress in selecting a task force appointee.

Kate distributed a National Parks Service brochure on the Underground Railroad.

John moved to adjourn the meeting. The meeting ended at 11:57 am.