

Underground Railroad Task Force Meeting

Monday, February 5, 2024 at 3:00 p.m.

Illinois Department of Natural Resources
1 Natural Resources Way, Springfield, IL

Attending: Task force members: John Ackerman, Jenn Edginton (via Webex), Representative Jackie Haas, Dave Joens, Senator David Koehler (via Webex), Larry McClellan (via Webex), Representative Debbie Meyers-Martin, Theodis Pace (via Webex), Senator Jil Tracy (via Webex) and Senator Doris Turner; Illinois Department of Natural Resources staff Meghan Lindstrom and Jamie Reynolds.

Guests: Jessica Scaife for Senator Jil Tracy (via Webex), Marynel Corton (via webex), Gerald McWorter (via Webex), Aaron Tebrinke (via Webex), and Art Wilson.

I. Introduction

The meeting was called to order at 3:02 p.m.

Art Wilson was introduced as an Underground Railroad expert from Jacksonville.

II. Minute Approval from January 16 Meeting

John Ackerman moved to approve the Minutes from the January 16 meeting. Dave Joens seconded and the motion passed unanimously.

III. Selection of Subcommittee Co-Chairs

Senator David Koehler recommended that each subcommittee be chaired by one member of the Task Force and one member of the public. Dave volunteered to be co-chair for the Historical Sites and Landmarks subcommittee along with Larry McClellan. Jenn Edginton volunteered to be co-chair for the Education and History subcommittee, citing her 20 years of experience in education. John suggested Gerald McWorter act as the co-chair.

Representative Debbie Meyers-Martin asked for clarification of the scope covered by the Communications and Technology subcommittee. Jamie Reynolds clarified that the subcommittee would determine how stories of the Underground Railroad would be told and showcased. This could include museum exhibits, travelling exhibits for schools, or an interactive website. Representative Meyers-Martin volunteered to be co-chair for the Communications and Technology subcommittee along with John.

Larry McClellan joined the meeting virtually at 3:10 p.m.

Senator Koehler asked Theodis Pace to co-chair the Cultural and Community Impact subcommittee with Representative Jackie Haas.

Senator Koehler recommended other Task Force members divide up between the subcommittees to assist the co-chairs.

Jamie stated she would meet with the subcommittee co-chairs to discuss logistics of the subcommittee meetings.

Jamie shared the results of the public interest survey. Every subcommittee received applicants but

Education and History was the most numerous.

IV. Subcommittee Goals and Objectives

Senator Koehler explained that the Task Force would plan out the future structure of the statewide Underground Railroad work while the subcommittees would deal with more detailed work. Based on the previous meeting he anticipated the Task Force will suggest the creation of a permanent commission. Larry suggested naming the future commission the “Illinois Freedom Trails Commission”. Senator Koehler recommended the name be officially decided at the time the Task Force writes its report for the General Assembly. He stated that if a commission was proposed then the Task Force would also be required to determine budget and staffing.

Senator Koehler charged each subcommittee to find ways to engage people across the state.

Representative Meyers-Martin recommended that the Historic Sites and Landmarks subcommittee prioritize the creation of an inventory list. She anticipated more interest and investment from the people of Illinois if they see their own locations highlighted. It would then be a priority for the Communications and Technology subcommittee to find ways to keep those people engaged. Art recommended the inventory be started by contacting visitor centers throughout the state advertising Underground Railroad sites, where research has already been completed and they may know further connections. Larry stated that local inventories vary and some rely only on oral history while others require corroborating evidence. Jamie said that she has been contacted by the public asking how the Task Force will fact check sites. John recommended identifying regional projects which have completed more in-depth research. Once the main routes of the Underground Railroad throughout the state are established it could be the responsibility of the commission to identify remaining connections.

Senator Doris Turner joined the meeting at 3:34 p.m.

Gerald recommended that the first step for the inventory be the creation of a list of all nominated sites. Then the list could be sorted to identify sites that are only supported by oral history and research can be done to find further proof the sites are legitimate. Larry suggested a system of evaluation be established to verify site claims.

Senator Koehler recommended the subcommittees discuss how to sustain interest in the work. Previous attempts to create a statewide Underground Railroad network have failed and the Task Force will need to find solutions to avoid that.

Marynel Corton asked if the Task Force was working with the National Parks Service’s Network to Freedom. John said it would be the responsibility of a future commission to tie the state project in with the national project. Senator Koehler invited Marynel to join the Historic Sites and Landmarks subcommittee.

Senator Jil Tracy asked who would coordinate the database of locations. Senator Koehler said all information and possible leads should be forwarded to Jamie.

Jamie recommended the subcommittee co-chairs reach out to the applicants and then inform her if they choose to join the subcommittee.

Representative Meyers-Martin stated that a goal list had been sent out to the Task Force.

Senator Koehler recommended any further questions on the subcommittee goals and objectives be directed to Jamie.

V. Public Involvement at Meetings

The Task Force discussed the logistics of the public attending meetings. Jamie clarified that the Task Force is regulated by the Open Meetings Act (OMA) and must be open to the public. She recommended all meetings and subcommittee meetings be both in person and over Webex due to space constraints.

Jenn recommended that time be reserved at the end of each meeting for public comment. Dave recommended rules be established for public speaking and published on the Task Force's website.

Senator Koehler asked if the subcommittees would be required to follow the OMA. John stated that the subcommittees would be more accurately described as working groups and that may affect the requirements. Senator Koehler asked Jamie to meet with the Department of Natural Resources' Ethics Officer to clarify the correct term and OMA requirements.

Senator Koehler left the meeting at 3:55 p.m.

VI. Closing Remarks

Representative Meyers-Martin asked for any closing remarks. John invited attendees to a grave marking ceremony on May 21 hosted by the Sangamon County Historical Society. Senator Turner commended Gerald on the Freedom Corridor Conference event held in Jacksonville earlier in the month.

VII. Next meeting

The next meeting will be held on March 4 at 2:00 p.m. Jamie will send out the meeting notice.

Senator Tracy left the meeting at 4:02 p.m.

Theodis moved to adjourn the meeting. Dave seconded and the meeting ended at 4:06 p.m.