

Underground Railroad Task Force Meeting

Monday, March 4, 2024 at 2:00 p.m.

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

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

I. Introduction

Senator David Koehler called the meeting to order at 2:00 p.m.

Jamie Reynolds called the roll and a quorum was present.

II. Minutes Approval from February 5 Meeting

Senator Koehler called for a motion to approve the Minutes from the February 5 meeting. John Ackerman moved, Dave Joens seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

III. Subcommittee Meeting Times/Dates/Format, Goals, and Objectives

Jamie reported that she met with Representative Debbie Meyers-Martin and Senator Koehler to determine the timeline for future Task Force meetings.

Senator Jil Tracy joined the meeting at 2:05 pm.

Jamie proposed the following meeting schedule and goals:

April 8

No May meeting

June 3

July 1

August 5

September 9—The Subcommittee reports will be due.

October 7—The Task Force will set parameters for the final report.

November 18 – The Task Force will complete a preliminary review of the final report.

December 9—The Task Force will review and approve the final report.

John asked if there would be an official press conference to announce the final report's completion and handing over to the legislature. Senator Koehler said the Task Force would need to wait until January for a news conference announcing the official filing of the legislation.

John moved to approve the calendar, Dave seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

Senator Koehler asked for Representative Jackie Haas and Theodis Pace to provide an update on the work of the Cultural and Community Impact Subcommittee.

Theodis shared the subcommittee had been discussing how to impact individual communities compared

to the state of Illinois as a whole, as well as how to market it to the public. Possible partnerships were discussed including the various branches of the NAACP throughout Illinois, local historical societies, the African American History Museum in Springfield, tourism agencies in Brownsville and other locations in the Chicago area, and art groups or individual artists.

Dave recommended the Cultural and Community Impact Subcommittee coordinate with the Historical Sites and Landmarks Subcommittee. They plan to email all historical societies in the state and both subcommittees could benefit from that connection. Senator Koehler clarified that the Historical Sites Subcommittee would focus on identifying sites while the Cultural and Community Impact Subcommittee would focus on finding partners to network together, along with finding ways to best market the Underground Railroad research in those areas. A network of those organizations could be included in any future website.

Senator Koehler instructed the Task Force members to email any other ideas for the subcommittee to Jamie.

Senator Koehler asked for an update on the Education and History Subcommittee.

Gerald McWorter shared that the subcommittee was broadening the search beyond the Underground Railroad to include the stories of freedom seekers, general abolitionism in Illinois, and the establishment of black communities in the state. The subcommittee is considering the need for a website of resources to help teachers develop curriculum related to the Underground Railroad, provide an updated bibliography on the subject, and spread word about newly published books. Gerald would also like to find ways to capitalize on Black History Month and Juneteenth and make connections to research and education efforts in neighboring states.

John recommended that the subcommittee reach out to universities especially Knox College which has direct ties to the Underground Railroad. Dave recommended the subcommittee also partner with Northwestern University.

Senator Koehler asked for an update on the Historical Sites and Landmarks Subcommittee.

Dave reported that the subcommittee was crafting an email to send out to historical societies throughout the state. They plan to gather lists of known sites and people knowledgeable of the local histories of the Underground Railroad. Jamie said she would reach out to Jenn to see if the Museum would be able to maintain and house that information.

John recommended the subcommittee investigate funding sources to maintain sites. Many are privately owned and it would be imperative to find ways to prevent their destruction and to fund maintenance.

Senator Koehler asked for an update on the Technology and Communication Subcommittee.

Representative Meyers-Martin stated she would meet the following day with John to plan out the subcommittee's schedule and goals.

John stated that the subcommittee would need to find ways to help interested parties communicate, preferably with a website to share information and events.

Senator Koehler said that the repository would be the responsibility of the subcommittee as well. They would need to decide how to best gather, preserve, and make the work of other subcommittees available to the public.

Jamie recommended the subcommittee connect with the Education and History Subcommittee to plan how the Underground Railroad story is told in Illinois, such as an exhibit at a museum or a traveling exhibit for schools.

IV. Closing Remarks

Senator Koehler reminded the Task Force their goal was to complete a report for the Governor and legislature outlining their findings and recommending how the state will continue the work.

Senator Koehler asked co-chairs to prepare to report to the Task Force at the next meeting. He asked them to include how many volunteers have signed up for the subcommittee, when the meetings are being held, if they are virtual or in-person, and provide a short report on what has been done in the past month.

John recommended that one of the subcommittees investigate dates and anniversaries that could be used to commemorate the Underground Railroad. He suggested the Hamilton Primary School, the first free and integrated school in the United States, which is quickly approaching the 200th anniversary of its establishment. Senator Koehler suggested that this be investigated by the Education and History Subcommittee.

V. Public Comment

None present.

VI. Next Meeting

Dave moved to end the meeting, John seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

The meeting ended at 2:57 pm.