

Underground Railroad Task Force Meeting

Monday, June 3, 2024 at 2:00 p.m.

WebEx meeting

Attending: Task Force Co-Chairs: Senator David Koehler and Representative Debbie Meyers-Martin; **Task Force Members:** John Ackerman, Jenn Edginton, Representative Jackie Haas, Larry McClellan, and Senator Doris Turner; Illinois Department of Natural Resources staff Meghan Lindstrom, Jamie Reynolds, Kevin Romo, and Adrien Rose; other attendees: Gerald McWorter, Jessica Scaife, and Art Wilson.

I. Introduction

Senator Dave Koehler called the meeting to order at 2:03 pm.

Jamie Reynolds called the roll and a quorum was present.

II. Minutes Approval from April 29 Meeting

Jamie presented the Minutes from the April 29 meeting. Larry McClellan moved to approve the Minutes and the motion passed unanimously.

III. New Business

Representative Debbie Meyers-Martin confirmed that the House passed the Task Force's requested extension. The deadline for the Task Force's report is now the end of 2024.

IV. Reminders

Jenn Edginton reminded the Task Force members to use “blind carbon copy” emails if they need to distribute something to the other members. This would prevent discussion of Task Force business over email and keep the Task Force compliant with the Open Meetings Act. Senator Koehler also reminded the Task Force that all meeting Minutes and relevant emails can be requested under the Freedom of Information Act.

V. Subcommittee Updates

Representative Jackie Haas reported for the Cultural and Community Impact subcommittee. The subcommittee had not been able to schedule a meeting due to the legislative session.

Jenn reported for the Education and History subcommittee. She reported that the subcommittee members have been investigating how institutions have been working on the Underground Railroad, creating an inventory of programs, and brainstorming how to coordinate the work. Jenn proposed that one Task Force inventory be created to aggregate all the information gathered by the subcommittees. Jenn further shared that the subcommittee is focused on building connections in African American communities and ensuring their voices are centered in the work.

Sen. Koehler proposed the Education and History subcommittee investigate how the future commission could best collect information and where and how it should be stored.

Larry reported for the Historical Sites and Landmarks subcommittee. He had drafted a one-page report of the subcommittee's work along with a list of more than 1000 contacts identified in more than 40 counties. Larry has continued to speak with Barry Jurgensen, the Midwest General Manager of the National Parks Service's Network to Freedom. Larry recommended he be invited to the July or August

Task Force to speak about the work of the Network to Freedom. Senator Koehler asked if there were any objections to inviting him to a Task Force meeting. There were none. Senator Koehler asked Larry to work with Jamie to set up an invitation for Barry Jurgensen to attend a future meeting.

Larry reported that he had submitted a formal proposal for the outreach committee to speak at the annual Conference on Illinois History to be held in October.

Senator Koehler asked Jenn if the Task Force could hold future events at the Illinois State Museum (ISM) and consider it for the state entity to assist the future commission. Jenn agreed that the Museum would be a good fit with support from the larger Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Jamie stated the State Historic Sites were also under the DNR umbrella, of which some were relevant to the Underground Railroad. John Ackerman recommended the future commission work with the Springfield and Central Illinois African American History Museum, which has stated it will build an exhibit focused on the Underground Railroad. Gerald recommended the future commission work with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. Jenn confirmed that the ISM had collaborated with both museums before and could do so for this commission.

Representative Meyers-Martin recommended the Task Force hold discussions with ISM staff to determine if they were prepared to accept responsibility for the commission and, if agreed, to find ways to help empower them to be the custodians of the full scope of work being outlined for the commission. Larry recommended the Task Force consider the expanse of inventory the full commission will be expected to inspect, analyze, and store. He stated that a full list of relevant contacts would not necessarily be directly related to the Underground Railroad. Jamie suggested that Jenn and the ISM would be a good place to store such information. Senator Koehler suggested that Larry and Jenn discuss this further to determine if the ISM could handle this.

Art Wilson joined the meeting at 2:28 pm.

Larry asked Jamie to distribute the subcommittee's one page report and draft contact list to the Task Force members by email.

Representative Meyers-Martin reported for the Communications and Technology subcommittee. The subcommittee had not been able to schedule a meeting due to the legislative session. Representative Meyers-Martin recommended the subcommittee monitor what is being publicized about the Underground Railroad, establish ways to determine their accuracy, and decide how best to share that with the public. Larry supported the recommendation and cautioned the Task Force that it may be a difficult process due to deep misconceptions and local myths about the Underground Railroad. Senator Koehler recommended the enabling legislation make it clear the future commission will be an authority over the accuracy of anything published about the Underground Railroad.

Representative Meyers-Martin and Senator Doris Turner recommended the Task Force be active during the upcoming Juneteenth celebrations to raise awareness of the Task Force. Senator Koehler asked if there was any budget in DNR to create pamphlets to be released at Juneteenth celebrations. Jamie confirmed there was no budget for the Task Force but she would ask DNR fiscal staff if there was any available funding.

John commended the idea of sharing the Task Force's mission at Juneteenth events but warned that there was little time to prepare statements for the public. John recommended that instead the Task Force

film small videos at Underground Railroad sites that can be released as commercials. Task Force members could share a little information about the sites to both raise awareness of the sites themselves and of the Task Force's work. Jamie reminded the Task Force that all communications would need to run through DNR's communications office before release.

Senator Koehler provided an outline for the Task Force's final report. First, the report would list the subcommittees, co-chairs, and participants. Second, it would list the findings and relevant materials gathered by the Task Force. Third, it would provide a brief summary of the relevance of those findings, with a particular note that it was only a start to the investigation of the full Underground Railroad material throughout the state. Fourth, it would recommend how a permanent commission would pursue this in the future and provide the commission with its mission. This will include where the commission will be housed, who will be appointed to the commission and how they will be appointed, and determining the terms of commissioners.

Gerald requested that the need for a budget be included in the report. Senator Koehler agreed the commission would need appropriations.

Art Wilson recommended the Task Force investigate if there are any remaining funds from previous programs which aimed to document and commemorate the Underground Railroad.

Senator Koehler asked Jamie to email the timeline out to Task Force members. He recommended each subcommittee prepare a report for the September meeting with an executive summary of what the subcommittee has accomplished. Those will be used to determine what is recommended in the final report.

Gerald asked if any staff would be hired to support the commission if the General Assembly passes legislation. Senator Koehler recommended that a director be hired to manage the commission and that the Task Force should identify what responsibilities the director would need to take on.

IV. Public Comment

Senator Koehler asked for public comment. There were none.

Jenn left the meeting at 3:00 pm.

V. Closing Remarks

Senator Koehler asked for closing remarks.

Art requested to be added to the Education or Sites subcommittees. Gerald said he would contact Art about the Education subcommittee.

Gerald reminded the Task Force about the conference being planned for February 2025. He recommended the Underground Railroad be made the focus of the conference and have it be the public launch for the proposal of the future commission.

VI. Next Meeting

Senator Koehler reminded the Task Force that the next meeting would be held on July 1 at 2 pm. Larry requested that the meeting be moved to July 8. Senator Koehler asked if there were any objections to moving the July 1 meeting to July 8. There were none. The next meeting of the Underground Railroad

Task Force will be on July 8.

Larry moved to end the meeting. The meeting was ended at 3:04 pm.