

Underground Railroad Task Force Meeting

Monday, July 8, 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, Dave Joens, and Larry McClellan; Illinois Department of Natural Resources staff Meghan Lindstrom and Jamie Reynolds, other attendees: Andrew Heckenkamp, Barry Jurgensen, and Art Wilson.

I. Introduction

Representative Debbie Meyers-Martin called the meeting to order at 2:06 pm.

Jamie Reynolds called the roll and a quorum was present.

II. Minutes Approval from June 3 Meeting

Jamie presented the Minutes from the June 3 meeting. Senator David Koehler moved to approve the Minutes, Jenn Edginton seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

III. Open Meetings Act Reminder

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.

IV. National Park Service Trail to Freedom

Representative Meyers-Martin introduced Barry Jurgensen, the Midwest Regional Manager for the National Park Service's Trail to Freedom. Barry shared the history of the Trail to Freedom program, which was established in 1998 to commemorate, preserve, and celebrate the Underground Railroad. They focus on the stories of freedom seekers and take a historical approach and require documentation to verify the stories before the sites are added to the network. Barry hopes the program can work with the Task Force to mainstream interpretation for the Underground Railroad in Illinois. He also advised that once a site is verified and listed in the Trail to Freedom they become eligible for National Park Service grants. Those are awarded once a year and support a variety of projects, from brick-and-mortar to interpretation.

Barry shared that an intern with the Trail to Freedom is currently working on central Illinois sites to establish connections between southern Illinois and Chicago. Illinois has nearly thirty sites listed already and most are houses associated with white abolitionists.

Larry recommended the Quinn Chapel in Chicago be a priority nomination for the Trail to Freedom. Art Wilson asked how to nominate sites. Barry outlined the application process, which is completed twice a year. The nearest deadline for submissions is July 15th. After submissions are reviewed the new listings will be announced in September. The next deadline for submissions will be January and new listings will be announced in March. Grant opportunities for sites will open later in the spring.

Senator Koehler recommended the permanent commission be a resource to disseminate information on how the public can be involved in the nomination process. John Ackerman recommended the permanent commission start researching sites and gathering documentation proving their historical significance, and then forward that information to the national program for nominations.

Barry recommended the Task Force consider the Michigan Freedom Trail Commission and Harriet Tubman Byway as examples as they plan out the future commission.

Representative Meyers-Martin recommended the Task Force and future Commission create stronger ties to the Trail to Freedom. She invited Barry to join the Task Force's future meetings.

V. Subcommittee Updates

No one from the Cultural and Community Impact subcommittee was present to provide a report.

Jenn reported for the Education and History subcommittee. The subcommittee was unable to meet in June and they are working to schedule a meeting the following week. Focusing on gathering recommendations based on resources. Know the UR is something that is included in some curriculum standards. Recommend an audit be made of current curriculum teaching students about the Underground Railroad. Head of IAM. Smaller cultural organizations as well. Gerald has started prepping the subcommittee's report. Really need to understand the focus of UR in Illinois, not just the trails.

Andrew Heckenkamp joined the meeting at 2:36 pm.

Dave Joens reported for the Historical Sites and Landmarks subcommittee. The subcommittee is ready to start preparing their report. They have reached out to experts in each county and created a list of names and contacts for the commission. Dave recommended a resource page be created and maintained by the commission including the contacts and sites but also published books or events. Need funding to promote them too.

Senator Koehler supported the creation of an inventory of Underground Railroad experts and recommended the Task Force establish a way for the commission to continue to expand the list.

Larry recommended the commission have a deep relationship with the Network to Freedom program as well as the University of Illinois' extension service. He reported that he had spoken with the master gardeners and they are interested in working with the future commission to recreate the plants and landscapes freedom seekers saw as they traveled through Illinois.

Representative Meyers-Martin reported for the Communications and Technology subcommittee. The subcommittee was unable to meet in June but they were trying to schedule a meeting in late July or early August.

John recommended the Task Force create infomercials about Underground Railroad sites to be released when the final report is presented to the legislature. He recommended eight to ten videos be made to highlight 'sites in your backyard' to create interest in Illinoisans and show some of the work that can be completed by a permanent commission. Senator Koehler asked if the communications staff at the Department of Natural Resources would be able to make such public service announcements. Jamie said she would reach out to the communications staff but cautioned the Task Force that they primarily work in print or social media with no current video capabilities. The Task Force discussed other potential state resources that could be used to create the videos.

VI. Outstanding Business

Senator Koehler reminded the Task Force that Governor Pritzker signed the bill that extended the Task Force's report to the end of the calendar year.

IV. Public Comment

None given.

V. Closing Remarks

Representative Meyers-Martin invited the Task Force members to share any opportunities they had to discuss the work of the Task Force. Task Force members shared several Juneteenth and Underground Railroad events they had attended but all discussions about the Task Force at the events was informal.

Larry informed the Task Force that the Indiana Freedom Trails had been active for the first time in 8 years.

Dave Joens left the meeting at 2:56 pm.

VI. Next Meeting

Representative Meyers-Martin reminded the Task Force that the next meeting would be held on August 5th.

The meeting ended at 3:02 p.m.