



**Governor Pritzker and members of the Illinois General Assembly
Underground Railroad Task Force – Final Report
November 12, 2024**

When we first convened the Underground Railroad Task Force in January, we knew we had a big job in front of us which was essential to tell this history in Illinois. Our task was to bring together scholars, experts, task force members, educators, and more to create recommendations for the Governor on how Underground Railroad history could be explored and commemorated in Illinois.

The Task Force operated under the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and comprised of members who were representatives from the legislature, museums, archives, academic institutions, and local governmental organizations. Together we dove into the work and created subcommittees to bring in more expertise, passion, and stories. Our recommendations focused on communities, education, awareness, and privileging the stories that tie this pathway to freedom with Illinois.

The bravery of freedom seekers and underground railroad conductors represent the best in Illinoisians. Examples of helping fellow community members in need, exhibiting the strength to stand up for what is right, and exemplifying selflessness by putting others first serve as reminders not only of the history that happened here that, is often not talked about, but also a reminder of who we are. Our job was to look at the cultural organizations, scholars, and public historians who are actively doing the work to preserve, tell, and celebrate these stories of resiliency. We are proud to share what we uncovered and make recommendations on how to make this work more visible for the people of Illinois.

The Task Force is excited to share the results of our month long journey together, to ensure this history is told in Illinois through multiple different means. This has been a privilege to work with this group of individuals.

Sincerely,

Senator David Koehler
Co-chair

Representative Debbie Meyers-Martin
Co-chair

Contents

- Enabling Legislation
- Historical Background
- Underground Railroad Remembrance in Illinois
- The Underground Railroad Task Force
- Activity
- Findings
- Recommendation of the Task Force
- Appendix A. Membership of the Underground Railroad Task Force
- Appendix B. Minutes of the Illinois Underground Railroad Task Force

Enabling Legislation

On June 9, 2023, Public Act 103-0097 was signed into law establishing the Illinois Underground Railroad Task Force. The Illinois Underground Railroad Task Force shall develop a statewide plan to connect existing local projects and new projects to create a cohesive statewide history of the underground railroad in Illinois, while developing new educational and tourism opportunities for this State.

Historical Background

In the broadest sense, it is important to understand that the Underground Railroad included two great cycles of stories. The stories of enslaved people in the south finding the means as individuals, families, and small groups to seek their freedom and the stories of people who responded to their journeys through the networks of the Underground Railroad. Illinois history needs to be a rich storehouse for stories of those coming to and through the state as freedom seekers and of the great diversity of black and white individuals, families and communities across Illinois who sought to be of help.

From the onset of statehood in 1818 and into the Civil War years, 4,500 to 7,000 freedom seekers moved into and through Illinois. They traveled up the Illinois River Valley and overland from the Mississippi River towns of Cairo, Chester, Alton, Quincy, Galena, and innumerable smaller places. Some came north through Indiana, some by foot, coach and horseback from Iowa and Wisconsin, and starting in the mid-1850's, by train. Throughout, the vast majority came from Missouri, Kentucky, and Tennessee. Others came up the Mississippi River valley from Louisiana, Mississippi, and Arkansas, and a few from eastern states.

For most, the major goal was reaching Detroit, Michigan, where movement to Canada was relatively easy and where there were significant bases for support both in Detroit and in free settlements across the Detroit River in Ontario, Canada. Many traveled overland through northwest Indiana and southern Michigan to reach Detroit. By the mid-1840's, an increasing number went through Chicago and other Lake Michigan towns to obtain passage on vessels going to Detroit. After the mid-1850's, travel to Chicago by train was of growing importance, and some continued by train on to Detroit.

Significant points of response to and assistance for freedom seekers emerged across the state in the 1830's. As communications across Illinois grew rapidly in the early 1840's, those assisting freedom seekers became self-identified as the Underground Railroad.

In addition, it is important to see the Underground Railroad in the context of slavery and the anti-slavery movement in the 18th and 19th centuries. While slavery was widespread and legal in most of the country at some point in time, Illinois was generally a free state. Beginning with conditions when the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 was instituted, it is crucial to see the ambiguity and the continued existence of slavery in the state until its formal legal end with the state constitution of 1848. From this, we need to more fully understand the legal status of slavery in Illinois, and the demography of Black people at the county level, both slave and free. The Underground Railroad was a major focus for anti-slavery forces in the state, with a complex set of abolitionist activities, both by African American and Euro-Americans, e.g. John Jones in Chicago, Free Frank McWorter in New Philadelphia, Richard Eells in Quincy, and Elijah Lovejoy in Alton. Furthermore, the Underground Railroad activities were part of a range of freedom stories across the state and throughout the history of the state.

Underground Railroad Remembrance in Illinois

For the most part, Illinois' role in the Underground Railroad is not well known or marked. There may be more than 200 sites that can be identified with the journeys of freedom seekers and the work of the Underground Railroad in Illinois. Most of these have not been fully identified and only a relatively small number have been deeply researched. And, while there are remarkable examples of community and regional recognition of the work of the Underground Railroad, these activities have not been linked or seen together. This has resulted in a profoundly fragmented part of our state and national history. As suggested in the enabling legislation, we need to create a "cohesive statewide history" that impacts educational and tourism opportunities. In addition, many of the routes and sites of the Underground Railroad include communities often invisible and under-acknowledged in our state history.

The Underground Railroad Task Force

The Illinois Underground Railroad Task Force grew particularly out of the activities of citizens and elected officials seeking to develop a grave-marking program to honor the abolitionists assisting freedom seekers, those traditionally referred to as conductors on the UGRR. The grave marking program was initiated in Tazewell County and has since expanded to other counties in Illinois.

At the same time, there were numerous local events, programs and commemorations about the underground railroad occurring in Illinois. One goal of this Task Force was to identify the people and institutions involved in this work (see attached listing) The Task Force discovered that there is a remarkably diverse set of activities underway. Examples of these include:

- Freedom Corridor in central Illinois

- Programs in and around Alton
- Chicago to Detroit Freedom Trail
- Underground Railroad Conductor Project initiated in Tazewell County
- Cook County Underground Railroad commemoration planning project
- African American Heritage Trail in Champaign County
- Underground Railroad Project in Du Page County
- Approximately 26 National Park Service Network to Freedom sites in Illinois
- Additional specific Underground Railroad homes and sites
- Educational programming, books, presentations, videos, and exhibits

Activity

The Illinois Underground Railroad Task Force was created by a unanimous vote in the House and Senate in the summer of 2023. It is co-chaired by Sen. David Koehler of Peoria and Rep. Debbie Meyers-Martin of Matteson. The membership of the Task Force is attached. The Task Force held its first meeting on January 16, 2024, and generally met monthly after that (see attached minutes). Working with the many volunteers, volunteer groups and institutions already involved in preserving the history of the Underground Railroad, the basic task of the Task Force was to develop a detailed structure and ongoing framework that will support and encourage this work.

Findings

The Task Force found a broad array of Underground Railroad projects and programs across the State and as a result, identified a number of significant understandings and needs, including:

- Building connections across the state and with neighboring states.
- Addressing the significant lack of information and the prevalence of misinformation.
- Developing state level professional staff support for research, interpretation, and evaluation and for collaboration among sites and programs.

Recommendation of the Task Force

1. The Task Force recommends that the state establish, fund, and staff a commission to explore, research, and commemorate the journeys of freedom seekers and the sites in the State that became the networks of the Underground Railroad in Illinois.
2. That the potential commission shall be referred to as the "Illinois Freedom Trails Commission," which would parallel similar efforts in other states.
3. That the commission and its staff be associated with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources/Illinois State Museum or any other appropriate State agency.
4. That the commission have sufficient funding to support full time professional staff, scholars to implement commission projects, and a program for small project grants.
5. That the commission collaborate with existing organizations across the State that focus on the Underground Railroad.
6. That the commission collaborate with comparable entities in other states.

7. That the commission members be representative of public officials, scholars and community-based activists who have knowledge and interest in promoting the work of the commission.
8. That the commission members be broadly representative from across the whole state and the variety of groups interested in this work.

The Task Force recommends that the Commission be charged with the following:

1. Provide resources for individuals and local entities seeking to learn more about the Underground Railroad in Illinois and to promote Underground Railroad locations and information in their communities. Such resources shall include:
 - a. an online resource web environment containing things such as maps of journeys, sites, and conductor cemetery markers;
 - b. a state-wide calendar of related events;
 - c. research sources and bibliographies;
 - d. videos and links to videos; and
 - e. pictures, brief histories, and other materials developed locally and at the state level.
2. Collaborate with organizations focusing on the underground railroad that include:
 - a. local and regional Underground Railroad groups;
 - b. county and regional historical societies;
 - c. museums, especially museums that that a focus on slavery and the African American experience;
 - d. academic programs, especially Black Studies at the college level and history departments; and
 - e. organizations in African American communities
3. Manage a grant funding program.
 - a. Research and mark freedom seeker journeys and Underground Railroad sites.
 - b. Develop heritage tourism and promotional activities on the Underground Railroad in Illinois, including exhibits, lectures, symposiums, and online materials.
 - c. Support an Underground Railroad cemetery markers program pioneered by Tazewell County.
4. Work with the National Park Service's Network to Freedom program and serve as a liaison between the NPS and local entities.
5. Explore heritage tourism opportunities connecting the locations of freedom seeker journeys and Underground Railroad sites, working with the Illinois Office of Tourism and regional tourism agencies.
6. Connect freedom seekers and Underground Railroad stories to the range of freedom stories across the State and throughout the history of Illinois.

In relation to history and education, the Commission shall:

1. Develop and maintain an online database of freedom seekers and their journeys to and through Illinois.
2. Develop and periodically update a map of the geography of the Illinois underground railroad.
3. Maintain a biographical dictionary of key persons identified with the Underground Railroad in Illinois, including freedom seekers, abolitionist allies, and pro slavery antagonists.
4. Become part of implementing that every public elementary and high school shall include in its curriculum a unit of instruction studying the events of Black History, including the history of the African slave trade, slavery in America, and the vestiges of slavery in this country. This would require active interaction with appropriate educational leadership of the 852 school districts in the state of Illinois.
5. Identify scholars, in higher education and community-based organizations, to engage in research and to be recruited into a speakers bureau on the underground railroad and anti-slavery activity in the state of Illinois.
6. Support the development of curricula at all levels that focus on the journeys of freedom seekers and the Underground Railroad.
7. Support educational resources and activities during the month of February formally recognized as Black History Month.
8. Support and publicize local activities across the state that focus on the Underground Railroad. Particular focus should be on organizations in African American communities, helping people to undertake research related to the history of their local community.
9. Offer exhibits at meetings of organizations open to spreading knowledge about abolitionism and the underground railroad.

In relation to historic sites and landmarks, the Commission shall:

1. Maintain state-wide listings of freedom seeker/Underground Railroad sites and landmarks and contact persons connected with the each.
2. Assist individuals and local historical entities with assessing Underground Railroad sites and developing state-wide guidelines for the evaluation of sites and for historic markers, signage and other commemorative tools and activities. This may include journey sites and trails, specific sites and conductor cemetery sites.
3. Collaborate with the University of Illinois Extension Service Master Gardening program, the Department of Natural Resources and other partners on opportunities for Underground Railroad site development.
4. Assist in ensuring the preservation of existing sites that may be threatened with demolition or deterioration.

Appendix A

Membership of the Illinois Underground Railroad Task Force

Illinois Senator David Koehler, Co-chair

Appointed by President of the Senate

Illinois Representative Debbie Meyers-Martin, Co-chair

Appointed by Speaker of the House of Representatives

Illinois Senator Jil Tracy, Member

Appointed by the Minority Leader of the Senate

Illinois Representative Jackie Haas, Member

Appointed by the Minority Leader of the House of Representatives

Illinois Senator Doris Turner, Member

Appointed by Governor J.B. Pritzker

John Ackerman, Member

Clerk of Tazwell County

Jennifer Edginton, Member

Illinois Department of Natural Resources designee

Dave Joens, Member

Director of the Illinois State Archives

Larry, McClellan, Member

Illinois State Historical Society designee

Theodis Pace, Member

NAACP Illinois State Conference designee

Contributing Honorary Task Force Members

Gerald McWorter

Art Wilson

Jamie Reynolds, IDNR Legislative Liaison/Task Force Administrative Support

Appendix B

Minutes of the Illinois Underground Railroad Task Force Meetings

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.

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.

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.

Underground Railroad Task Force Meeting

Monday, April 29, 2024 at 2:00 p.m.

WebEx meeting

Attending: Task Force Co-Chairs: Senator David Koehler and Representative Debbie Meyers-Martin; **Task Force Members:** Jenn Edginton, Representative Jackie Haas, Dave Joens, Larry McClellan, Theodis Pace, Senator Jil Tracy and Senator Doris Turner; Illinois Department of Natural Resources staff Meghan Lindstrom and Jamie Reynolds; other attendees: Gerald McWorter and Owen Muelder.

I. Introduction

Senator Dave Koehler called the meeting to order at 2:04 pm.

Jamie Reynolds called the roll and a quorum was present.

II. Minutes Approval from March 4 Meeting

Jamie presented the Minutes from the March 4 meeting. Larry McClellan moved to approve the Minutes, Senator Doris Turner seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

III. Subcommittee Updates

Theodis Pace reported for the Cultural and Community Impact subcommittee. He stated that he had met with Representative Jackie Haas to discuss the subcommittee. He stated they would provide a larger update at the June 3rd meeting.

Gerald McWorter reported for the Education and History subcommittee. The subcommittee had already held its first meeting with 15 people in attendance. Discussion focused on three levels of recognition for Underground Railroad sources: oral history, local documentation, and official recognition at a state or national level. The subcommittee is mindful to put the Underground Railroad in the context of the antislavery movement and the broader concept of freedom. Gerald

reported they intend to emphasize the work of existing programs focused on the Underground Railroad and hope the future commission will maintain those connections and coordinate and collaborate with them. The subcommittee will continue to meet monthly.

Larry recommended the subcommittee create a list of active Underground Railroad programs throughout the state. Representative Debbie Meyers-Martin recommended the subcommittee continue to reach out to existing sites and programs since many are still unaware of the existence of the Task Force.

Dave Joens reported for the Historical Sites and Landmarks subcommittee. He reported that this subcommittee was also researching what Underground Railroad programs currently existed in the state and making connections. Roughly 900 emails were sent out to relevant organizations, sites, and subject experts and around 800 were delivered. Responses were received from 35-40% of Illinois counties. Dave recommended that the final report include state funding for grants to support the projects these organizations are running.

Larry stated that the subcommittee had four recommendations for the future commission. First the commission should connect with the National Park Service's Network to Freedom. Second, the commission should reach out to multi-county programs, particularly those in Canada. Third, the commission should establish the means to evaluate and classify Underground Railroad sites. Fourth, the commission should connect with other groups interested in Underground Railroad stuff, particularly African American history museums across the state. Larry said that Barry Jurgensen, from the National Park Service's Network to Freedom project, had expressed support for the Task Force and Larry would invite him to the next subcommittee meeting.

Larry introduced the annual Conference on Illinois History, which would be held from October 3rd to 5th in Springfield. Larry proposed the Task Force be present at the conference and he volunteered to create a 15 to 20 minute update for the public in preparation for the announcement of the commission.

Representative Meyers-Martin opened the floor for comment on the proposal.

Gerald commended the proposal but suggested the focus be on the Underground Railroad with the Task Force's report being the framework. Gerald further proposed that the Task Force make their public announcement of the report at the Freedom Corridor Conference held in February 2025.

Senator Koehler advised that the Task Force needed to make their work visible to the public throughout the process in order to secure public interest. He recommended creating an outreach committee.

Larry proposed that he, Gerald, and subject expert Owen Muelder make the presentation at a panel at the Conference on Illinois History in October.

Senator Jil Tracy supported providing updates to the public and emphasized the importance of having a shareable report with a unified message. Larry requested that Jamie create a one-page list of highlights after each meeting with information that could be shared with the public. Jamie said that could start after the June meeting. She recommended that the subcommittee chairs send Jamie summaries of their updates to ensure meeting highlights are accurate.

Representative Meyers-Martin reported for the Communications and Technology subcommittee. The subcommittee met in April and discussed how they would help communicate everything being gathered by other subcommittees. One proposal was at the end of the Task Force each member would provide a recording of themselves discussing what work had been done by their subcommittee. The second meeting for the subcommittee had been postponed since it was originally scheduled for April 29th.

Gerald asked when the Task Force would discuss the construction of the commission. Senator Koehler recommended the Task Force start discussing the commission at the June meeting. He further recommended that the Task Force plan ways to bring their work to the public, such as holding a celebration at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. Jenn Edginton recommended such events be held at the Illinois State Museum instead since the Museum was already involved with the Task Force.

Senator Doris Turner recommended the Task Force organize summer events or exhibits that could drive up public interest in the work. Representative Meyers-Martin recommended Alton and New Philadelphia as good locations to host events for the public.

Senator Koehler requested to join the Communications and Technology subcommittee and recommended Senator Turner join as well for the purpose of finding ways to share the Task Force's work with more non-academic people.

Senator Koehler asked for a motion to create an outreach committee to better engage and communicate with the public, including emphasis on the Task Force's representation at the Conference on Illinois History. Larry so moved. Representative Meyers-Martin asked for a vote and the motion was approved.

IV. Public Comment

Representative Meyers-Martin invited subject expert Owen Muelder to speak. Owen recommended the Task Force investigate more about abolitionism in Illinois, particularly focusing on places associated with the American Antislavery Society since many agents of the Society gave lectures and raised money at numerous sites throughout the state.

Senator Tracy recommended the commission be tasked with creating a map of all known Underground Railroad locations, including ones that no longer exist. Gerald seconded the need for maps but cautioned the task force that the popular idea of established trails on the Underground Railroad conflicts with the historical reality.

Owen asked if Senate President Don Harmon would be contacted to help secure funding aid for the commission's future endeavors. Senator Koehler confirmed that Senate President Harmon would have a role in creating and funding the commission.

V. Closing Remarks

Representative Meyers-Martin asked for closing remarks.

Senator Koehler commended the Task Force for their work and was pleased to see them gaining momentum.

Representative Meyers-Martin reported that a Canadian official had expressed interest in the Task Force's work. She would work with Jamie to contact each Task Force member to determine when to

invite him to attend a Task Force meeting. Larry supported his attendance and recommended the future commission foster deep connections to the National Parks Service's Network to Freedom along with other relevant groups in the Western Ontario and Niagara Falls regions. Gerald reported that he would be in Canada to attend a national conference at the end of May and would return to the Task Force with recommendations for further connections.

Larry requested a guide to clarify government terms, such as commissions and departments. Senator Koehler said he would have something prepared later in the summer.

VI. Next Meeting

Representative Meyers-Martin reminded the Task Force that the next meeting would be held on June 3rd at the Department of Natural Resources' headquarters in Springfield and via Webex.

Senator Koehler moved to end the meeting and the meeting was ended at 2:58 pm.

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.

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 subcommittees 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.

Underground Railroad Task Force Meeting

Monday, August 5, 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, Larry McClellan, and

Senator Jil Tracy; Illinois Department of Natural Resources staff Meghan Lindstrom and Kevin Romo, other attendees: Gerald McWorter and Art Wilson.

I. Introduction

Senator Dave Koehler called the meeting to order at 2:04 pm.

Kevin Romo called the roll and a quorum was present.

II. Minutes Approval from July 8 Meeting

Kevin presented the Minutes from the July 8 meeting. Representative Debbie Meyers-Martin moved to approve the Minutes, Dave Joens seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

III. New Business

Senator Koehler recommended the Task Force discuss the final report after the subcommittee updates.

IV. Subcommittee Updates

No one from the Cultural and Community Impact Subcommittee was present to provide a report. Kevin noted that there had been no one present to provide an update for the subcommittee at the previous Task Force meeting so a new method for them to report would need to be established.

Gerald reported for the Education and History Subcommittee. He said he would provide an update via email.

Dave and Larry McClellan reported for the Historical Sites and Landmarks Subcommittee. They are ironing out some broad recommendations for the commission. The subcommittee had established communication with individuals in 39 counties who provided information about other local experts and Underground Railroad sites. Dave recommended a resource page be created to promote those along with an online library.

Jenn Edginton joined the meeting at 2:12 pm.

Dave also recommended the creation of a commission be prioritized in the final report and further recommended that the report advocate for funding for an Underground Railroad conductor program.

Art Wilson expressed concern that the high concentration of subject experts in some counties would inundate the commission with repeated reports on the same sites, with some less informed researchers also providing erroneous information. Dave explained that the subcommittee's intention was to cast the widest net possible to gather all available information about the Underground Railroad, regardless of veracity. It would be the duty of the commission to determine how to evaluate that information. John Ackerman and Larry supported the wide net tactic and warned that choosing individual partners to work with in each county would mean some stories and sites could be missed.

Gerald recommended the commission be charged to purposefully develop connections to African American communities around the state.

Senator Koehler recommended the Education and History Subcommittee research how to show recognition for individuals who have contributed greatly to knowledge of the Underground Railroad in Illinois.

John reported for the Communications and Technology Subcommittee. He said they are determining how to best spread the word about the final report to the public and legislators in order to build momentum for future legislation. Representative Meyers-Martin reported that the subcommittee members have fluctuated and there have been some communication issues. She recommended that she and John work with Jamie Reynolds to fix those issues.

Koehler proposed the Task Force create a Drafting Subcommittee to begin drafting the final report. He proposed Jenn, Gerald, Larry, Dave, and Theodis Pace consider serving on the Drafting Subcommittee. Jenn cautioned the Task Force to be mindful of the subcommittees' headcount in order to remain compliant with the Open Meetings Act. After discussion, Senator Koehler proposed Larry, Dave, and Jenn serve on the Drafting Subcommittee. Gerald and other subject experts not on the Task Force could join the subcommittee meetings without breaking OMA compliance. Senator Koehler proposed that Gerald and Larry serve as co-chairs for the subcommittee. He recommended all other Task Force members be willing to lend their expertise in an individual basis if specific questions arise while drafting the final report.

Gerald invited the Task Force to share what they believe should be included in the final report.

Senator Koehler recommended the final report include the work completed by the Task Force, a structure for the future commission, and an appendix of existing Underground Railroad work and experts. After that he recommended the report focus on how to support the commission, such as identifying a supporting department like the Department of Natural Resources through the Illinois State Museum and determining funding and staffing needs.

Senator Jil Tracy recommended the final report include the motivation behind forming the Task Force to show the importance of the work along with examples of structures which could serve as examples for the future commission, particularly similar organizations in Michigan and Ohio. Larry also recommended the final report identify models for the commission to emulate but the actual governance structure would be included in the legislation instead.

Senator Koehler recommended Larry and Gerald reach out to other Task Force members for individual meetings to utilize their legislative knowledge for the report.

John recommended the final report highlight the importance of connectivity, from statewide connections to boundaries beyond Illinois such as the Freedom Suits Memorial in St. Louis and the connection between Chicago and Detroit.

Senator Koehler asked for a motion to create the Drafting Subcommittee. John moved to create the Drafting Subcommittee, Senator Tracy seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

Representative Meyers-Martin advised that Jamie Reynolds and other Department of Natural Resources employee would be involved in creating the actual report. Kevin confirmed that DNR was responsible for submitting the report.

V. Outstanding Business / Next Steps

Senator Koehler recommended that the final report include a plan to work with Barry Jurgensen's National Parks Service Network to Freedom. Larry seconded the recommendation and noted that working with the National Parks Service would help the future commission establish connections with relevant organizations outside of Illinois.

VI. Public Comment

None given.

VII. Closing Remarks

Koehler invited attendees to give a short summary of how they feel about the work and progress of the Task Force.

Jenn left the meeting at 2:56 pm.

Senator Koehler recommended the Task Force organize a press conference in November to present the findings of the Task Force to the public. The Task Force would then use the last meeting in December to review a draft of the legislation.

VI. Next Meeting

The Task Force discussed changing future meeting dates. None of the dates were changed at this meeting.

The next Task Force meeting will be held on September 9 at the Department of Natural Resources in Springfield and via Webex.

The meeting ended at 3:02 p.m.

Underground Railroad Task Force Meeting

Monday, September 9, 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, Larry McClellan, and Senator Jil Tracy; Illinois Department of Natural Resources staff Meghan Lindstrom and Jamie Reynolds, other attendees: Gerald McWorter, Owen Muelder, and Art Wilson.

I. Introduction

Representative Debbie Meyers-Martin called the meeting to order at 2:01 pm.

Jamie Reynolds called the roll and a quorum was present.

II. Minutes Approval from August 5 Meeting

Jamie presented the Minutes from the August 5. Larry McClellan moved to approve the Minutes, John Ackerman seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

III. Report Draft Review / Drafting Subcommittee

Senator David Koehler thanked Larry, Dave Joens, Gerald McWorter, and Jenn Edginton for their work writing the final report. He particularly commended the historical background provided in the

report. Representative Meyers-Martin commended how the report pulled together the work of the task force in a straightforward way.

Larry commented that there is an increasing interest in understanding the Underground Railroad in the context of the anti-slavery movement. The Task Force suggested more broad connections the future commission could make to the anti-slavery movement, including particular churches and locations associated with Abraham Lincoln.

Art Wilson joined the meeting at 2:05 pm.

Senator Koehler recommended that the report's reference to HB 726 be changed to the Public Act and to remove the word 'mandate' in reference to education curriculum. He commended the report's recommendations and stated they would be the foundation for the future legislation.

Larry directed the Task Force to the recommendation that the future commission have funding. He particularly suggested funding the commission so it could award small grants to support efforts such as the research of Underground Railroad sites or the printing of brochures to share information about the sites with the public.

Senator Jil Tracy joined the meeting at 2:15 pm.

Owen Muelder asked what the process was to secure funding for the commission. Senator Koehler reminded the Task Force that the state budget was limited. He recommended the first step should be to craft legislation to establish the commission. The second step would be to establish a fund for the commission during the next budgeting session. If the Commission is housed with the Illinois State Museum, as discussed at previous meetings, then future funding for it would be a line in the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) budget. Representative Meyers-Martin reminded the Task

Force she had in previous meetings suggested the Commission have a relationship with the Office of Tourism, so there could also potentially be a revenue stream from the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO). Senator Tracy recommended that the Commission be housed in the DCEO instead of DNR, citing the department's struggle with deferred maintenance. Senator Koehler recommended the decision of where the commission is housed be deferred until the legislation had been written as it may help decide which department is a better fit.

John recommended the legislation include \$150 thousand in funding set aside each year for the creation of 30 historical markers. Senator Koehler cautioned against restricting the Commission's future funding before any has been established.

Gerald asked how the commission process worked. Senators Koehler and Tracy provided a broad example of how a commission is created and commissioners are appointed. Larry recommended the legislation be intentional in including academics as commissioners while also ensuring all parts of the state are represented.

Larry stated that the end of the report mentioned 3 appendixes, including a summary of the Minutes from each Task Force meeting.

The Task Force discussed grammar edits for the report.

IV. Next Steps

Representative Meyers-Martin recommended the Task Force plan an event to announce and celebrate the creation of the final report. Larry recommended a press conference be scheduled for mid-November followed by a party in Springfield. The Task Force discussed possible locations and funding options. Gerald recommended a press conference be scheduled at the capitol building with the celebratory party held later at the Springfield and Central Illinois African American History Museum.

John asked if another meeting was required to approve the final draft. Larry recommended the Task Force wait one month and continue to evaluate the report. He will send the newly corrected report to Jamie, who will compile it with the 3 appendixes, and then the full report can be evaluated at the October meeting.

V. Closing Remarks / Open Comment Period

Larry informed the Task Force of an Underground Railroad bus tour along the Little Calumet River which will be scheduled in October.

Gerald informed the Task Force of the upcoming celebration of Free Frank Freedom Day held in Barry on September 13th.

Owen emphasized the value of linking the Underground Railroad with the broader abolitionist and antislavery movement.

Larry reminded the Task Force of the presentation that will be given at the Illinois Conference for History on the work of the Task Force on Friday, October 4th.

VI. Next Meeting

The next Task Force meeting will be held on October 7 at the Department of Natural Resources in Springfield and via Webex.

Senator Tracy moved to adjourn the meeting, John seconded, and the meeting ended at 2:51 p.m.

Underground Railroad Task Force Meeting

Monday, October 7, 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, Dave Joens, Larry McClellan, and Senator Jil Tracy; Illinois Department of Natural Resources staff Meghan Lindstrom and Jamie Reynolds, other attendees: Gerald McWorter and Art Wilson.

I. Introduction

Senator David Koehler called the meeting to order at 2:07 pm.

Jamie Reynolds called the roll and the majority of a quorum was present.

Gerald McWorter joined the meeting at 2:08 pm.

II. Report Draft Review / Drafting Subcommittee

Larry McClellan spoke about the Conference on Illinois History which had been held in Springfield on October 3rd and 4th. Larry moderated a session on the Underground Railroad where he presented the work of the Task Force. Owen Muelder and Art Wilson also participated and shared the history and ongoing research into the Underground Railroad in their regions of the state.

Senator Koehler recommended the Task Force review the draft report page by page. He asked Jamie if the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Communications employees would be able to organize the final report in a more formal format. Jamie said she would make that request.

Senator Koehler suggested the final report include a list of people who had contributed in Task Force meetings. Jamie recommended listing all members of the subcommittees and Larry suggested adding the individuals throughout the state who had also contributed their expertise to the cause.

Dave Joens recommended the Task Force's co-chairs write a cover letter for the report.

The Task Force discussed minor edits for grammar and content.

Jamie proposed the Task Force reconsider recommendation 4: "That the commission and its staff be associated with the Illinois State Museum (ISM)". She posited that the commission would need to be associated with an agency and that would be the larger DNR. The Task Force debated the wording and considered other appropriate state agencies. They agreed to change the wording to "DNR/ISM or another appropriate state department."

John Ackerman joined the meeting at 2:25 pm.

The Task Force resumed discussion of minor edits for grammar and content.

John proposed that the recommendation for school curriculum to teach about the Underground Railroad [probably better to list the actual recommendation] also emphasize the teaching of local history.

The Task Force debated whether to spell out "Underground Railroad" or abbreviate it throughout the document. Senator Koehler eventually recommended it be left up to the discretion of the editor in each individual case.

III. Minute Approval from September 9 Meeting

The Minutes from the meeting on September 9 were presented for approval. Senator Tracy moved to approve the Minutes, Representative Meyers-Martin seconded, and the Minutes were approved unanimously.

IV. Next Steps

Larry moved to approve the report as edited, John seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

The Task Force debated when and where to hold a press conference and celebration in honor of the report being completed. They tentatively selected November 12th at 11 am in the Blue Room for the press conference. Senator Koehler recommended the co-chairs give statements at the press conference and invited others to also volunteer to give statements of support. Jamie recommended reserving the rotunda and the south wing for the celebration immediately following the conference.

V. Closing Remarks / Open Comment Period

Senator Koehler commended the Task Force for their focus and dedication to complete the final report and then opened the floor for closing remarks.

Larry was pleased to see so much interest in the Underground Railroad throughout the state, including the work of the Task Force, new exhibits, and research projects.

Representative Meyers-Martin and Senator Tracy both thanked attendees for their efforts and subject experts for sharing their expertise.

Gerald commended the report but reminded the Task Force that there was still work ahead to create a commission and establish funding.

Senator Koehler informed the Task Force that they may be asked to testify in support of the legislation.

Art Wilson thanked the Task Force for welcoming Underground Railroad experts to the meetings and allowing him to participate.

Jamie stated she would assemble the report and send it out for one final review. She would also reach out by email to alert attendees when the press conference is scheduled.

VI. Adjournment

Senator Koehler asked for a motion to adjourn. Senator Tracy moved to end the meeting, Dave seconded, and the meeting was adjourned at 2:54 pm.