

## **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 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> 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 29<sup>th</sup>.

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 3<sup>rd</sup> 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.