

REVISED PROPOSAL
City of Oberlin
Gasholder Property Underground Railroad Center

I. Introduction

Per the request of Oberlin City Council, the Public Services Institute (PSI) of Lorain County Community College met with City personnel to consider former achievements related to the Gasholder property Underground Railroad Center project. The information review was intended to help answer two key questions:

- To what extent has the public helped inform restoration of the Gasholder property as an underground railroad center (i.e., what is the extent and nature of former engagement efforts)?
- Is the information from former community engagement efforts sufficient to move the planning process to the next level (i.e., create a mission, vision, and disseminate information back to the community so people know they have been heard)?

After careful review of files and boxes of information relating to this project in Oberlin, the following observations and recommendations are made by PSI to help move the project forward.

II. Observations

A. Multiple community forums dating back to 1999 were identified.

- *1999:* Public forum convened by the City of Oberlin and Zion CDC; the result of this forum was the formation of Friends of the Underground Railroad; No information about the structure of this forum, number of participants, or a summary of public dialogue has been forwarded.
- *February 6, 2005:* A public forum was convened by the City and the Architect Selection Committee to provide the public with an opportunity to help select the design firm for the Underground Railroad Center. The architectural firm of Moody-Nolan was selected and awarded a contract as a result of this forum.
- *May 23, 2005:* The Human Relations Commission sponsored a public discussion at Oberlin Public Library (moderated by A.G. Miller). The format involved presentations from existing organizations involved in promoting the history of the Underground Railroad followed by an open mike Q & A session with the public. A total of 32 persons attended this forum. No summary of public comment has been provided.
- *January 23, 2006:* A public forum on the building program was convened by M-N architects, including a 'pre-meeting' to which neighborhood residents were individually invited. Summary notes, public comment sheets, a video of the meeting and the attendance list (38 persons attended) are available from this session.
- *Juneteenth, 2006:* The Design Team set up a booth at the Oberlin Juneteenth celebration which included the option to fill out a public comment sheet. This booth was intended to inform interested persons of the June 20th programming forum. No summary information of those comments and/or discussions has been forwarded.
- *June 20, 2006.* M-N architects hosted a second public forum to review the final draft building program. A two-page summary of public dialogue is available. The attendance sheets indicate 30 persons attended this forum.

B. Other Observations

- Design team members have expressed need for comprehensive community engagement and dissatisfaction with related efforts over the past couple of years:

“... the Design Team feels strongly that the program as submitted by xxx provides an overview of the building uses and spatial needs rather than a complete working document that we have expected and that we believe the project needs in order to provide the necessary clarity of purpose... it is important to be clear about our expectations”. The memo also called for additional community participation. “Community involvement in this project is considered absolutely critical to its short and long term success. This cannot be overstated”. *December 14, 2006 Memo to City Council from the Underground Railroad Center Design Team*

“xxx was disappointed with how xxx handled the public forum on June 20, 2006. There was consensus that xxx were not well prepared... and failed to facilitate an engaged discussion with the public. As a result, there appeared to be no consensus from the public on outstanding programmatic issues...” “xxx noted concern about conducting the public design charrette”. Expectations were summarized as follows: Engage the community. Facilitate interactive discussion. Support outreach efforts. Frame the discussion around key issues. Provide information on key decision-making. Realistically support the community vision. Provide leadership to help realize the community vision. Gather momentum and build excitement for the project. Bring their public meeting experience to the table in support of the foregoing”. *June 27, 2006 UGRR Center Design Committee Meeting Notes.*

“xxx wanted to keep this project in front of the community. People are starting to wonder why the project is moving slowly. Xxx suggested an information campaign to keep the community informed about project progress” A potential contract with Friends of the Underground Railroad Center (FOURC) to develop a mission statement, and assist a consultant with a feasibility study and community outreach was considered but not brought to fruition. *May 7, 2007 and June 4, 2007 UGRR Center Design Committee Meeting Notes.*

“Friends of the Oberlin Underground Railroad Center, members of the Design Team, staff and others have variously represented the project in formal meetings with the architect at a variety of public and private events and informally in the community. However, the lack of a public relations focal point, our collective inability to consistently engage all sectors of the community, the relatively slow pace of project development and our shared history have all contributed to a sense that the project may not have the widespread community buy-in that it should have”. This aspect of project development feeds into every other aspect.” “. . . multiple public meetings [were held] both to solicit ideas/feedback and to present the latest version of design development. It does not, however, rise to the level of on-the-ground full-time project support that the Design Team has indicated is necessary” *January 30, 2008 Memo to City Manager regarding Underground Railroad Center status.*

- Design Team dissatisfaction appears to center around format and structure of former public meetings; lack of broad-based engagement; limited attempts to feed information back to the public (or engage in a comprehensive information campaign); multiple attempts or formal proposals to take civic engagement to the next level; inability to move the entire project forward given lack of clarity and priorities; all possibly resulting in limited community support and enthusiasm for the project.
- The time lapse between public forums (5-7 formal sessions spread out across 8 or so years) has resulted in lack of continuity in engagement efforts. This typically leaves people frustrated with the process in different ways (those contributing significant time and effort to the project – including participation in multiple public forums - feel as if there is no need to reinvent the wheel. Others feel as if the engagement process has been lacking and have a desire to move forward with a more genuine, comprehensive engagement process). Either way, a time lapse of this nature damages project credibility on all fronts and leaves most people involved in the process feeling as if their views have not been heard.

III. PSI Recommendations

A. Public Engagement within the Southeast Quadrant of Oberlin

- PSI respects the differing viewpoints that currently exist as to whether or not an investment should be made in further community engagement. We feel a “happy medium” might be to target engagement efforts within the southeast quadrant of Oberlin where the Gasholder property is situated and there is a strong African American presence.
- Instead of asking residents of this neighborhood to attend public forums, a grass roots effort would be launched with local neighborhood organizations (such as churches, Zion CDC, neighborhood schools, etc.) so that we would be going to the residents versus asking them to come to us.
- Multiple outreach tools and techniques would be utilized by PSI (and community partners) to engage residents of this neighborhood in the design process.

Estimated Cost: \$5,400.00

B. Convene a Vision Council

- PSI proposes to recruit and engage members of the community to participate in a “Vision Council”. The purpose of the Vision Council would be to create a mission and vision statement, to prioritize design elements, and to develop succinct action steps to move from planning to implementation.
- We anticipate that all Design Team members would participate on the Vision Council along with other community representatives who have been active in the planning process over the last decade. We also recommend recruiting additional leaders for other sectors of the community that are not currently represented on the Design Team along with a small cross section of citizens (5-10) representing all geographic areas of the community – not just the southeast quadrant. The city might also consider inviting county-wide leaders such as a representative of the county Metroparks, the county Tourism Bureau, the county Chamber, etc.
- PSI will design and facilitate 2 separate sessions and summarize results of the Vision Council work into a clear and concise strategic plan.

Estimated Cost: \$6,000.00

C. Help Launch an Information Campaign

- PSI would provide consultation on dissemination of information back to the community.
- All information resulting from the work of the Vision Council would be “packaged” into various formats for public dissemination and education. This might include:
 - Series of press releases
 - Information/video clips of the Vision Council to the city and other community websites
 - Post card or other mailings (e.g., dissemination through public utility bills)
 - Summaries of the strategic plan for community newsletters

Estimated Cost: \$4,000.00

LCCC Support Services: \$1,540.00

TOTAL of A, B, C: \$16,940