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Ken Sloane, Oberlin City Council president, speaks Saturday at a community update on the Oberlin Underground Railroad Center to be built at the Gasholder Building site in Oberlin.

City proclaims Underground Railroad plans with a boom

Oberlin's Gasholder Building to be memorial and education center

Steve Fogarty
The Chronicle-Telegram

OBERLIN — Saturday's gathering at the historic Gasholder Building to let residents in on the latest plans for the long-proposed Oberlin Underground Railroad Center literally ended with a bang.

The single, loud boom from a balloon believed to have been used in the American Revolution, War of 1812 and the Civil War wasn't heard until most of the crowd of 100-plus had departed the grounds of the 1889 building, site of a long-planned interpretive history center.

Yet it served as a punctuation mark to a project that will be a testament to the city's proud tradition of championing equality and human rights, as exemplified by the town's open defiance of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, the 1858 Oberlin-Wellington Rescue of fugitive slave John Price from slave catchers and its well-known role as a haven for slaves seeking freedom along

the Civil War era's Underground Railroad.

The center will "define to Oberlin and the world what it means to be an American," according to George Abram, chairman of the Underground Railroad Center Implementation Team.

The primary goal of the center is to give the city something it has never had, a place where the legacy of the community's African-American population, long associated with Oberlin's "southeast quadrant," will be memorialized, displayed, and celebrated, said Darlene Colaso, assistant city manager.

The site is also envisioned as a spot to be used by community groups, as well as a location for Juneteenth and Kwanza observances.

Discussed for some years, the brick Gasholder Building also known as the Roundhouse, was used in the late 1800s to store manufactured coal gas used for the city's light and heat.

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"Make this be a sacred place. I don't know them all by name but they came here and built this town. History is living."

Oberlin historian Margaret Christian



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People take a limited tour of the Gasholder Building on Saturday at a community update on the Oberlin Underground Railroad Center.

Officials hope to have construction proposals ready later this year or by spring 2011. "The community has been incredibly willing and incredibly patient not to give up on this project," Colaso said. Contact: Steve Fogarty at 228-7146 or sfogarty@chronicle.com.

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Saved from demolition in 1990, it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1998.

"Make this be a sacred place," Oberlin historian Margaret Christian said as she spoke of black families whose local roots go back to the early 1800s. "I don't know them all by name but they came here and built this town. History is living."

An as-yet unannounced fundraising campaign will work to generate \$1.2 million in additional funds to supplement the \$1.117,600 already pledged via a \$917,600 Northeast Ohio Area-wide Coordinating Agency grant and a \$200,000 congressional earmark received in 2008. Money will be used to rehabilitate the building and do work on the park-and-ride facility.



PARTLY SUNNY

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