

SECTION 1: PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Underground Railroad Center

Executive Summary

The City of Oberlin has developed an exciting proposal, which combines several eligible Transportation Enhancement activities to revitalize the historic transportation-related Gasholder Building, develop its grounds into a multi-modal park, and tell the story of another form of transportation that once ran through Oberlin: the Underground Railroad.

The Gasholder Building, built in 1889, is a unique remnant of our industrial heritage, the only known surviving gasholder structure west of the Appalachian Mountains. The Gasholder Building was used to store manufactured coal gas from 1889 until 1918. Coal gas provided both light and heat in many late 19th century cities including Oberlin. In 1998, the U.S. Department of the Interior listed the "Oberlin Gas Lighting Company Gasholder House" on the National Register of Historic Places.

As an industrial facility, the Gasholder Building was located immediately adjacent to the Toledo, Norwalk and Cleveland Railway line, in order to transport coal gas to consumers far and wide. Although the railroad has not operated this route since the 1960's, the railway corridor has been converted to a bike trail and is now part of the 13.1 mile Lorain County section of the North Coast Inland Trail. It is the City's intent to rehabilitate the site of the Gasholder Building to develop a "Park and Ride" facility for bicyclists, in-line skaters and pedestrians. The proposed "Park and Ride" would include approximately 22 new parking spaces, a public restroom facility and other public amenities.

The Lorain County Transit Authority, which operates bus services throughout Lorain County, currently maintains a bus stop on the west side of State Route 58, approximately 500' from the project site. LCT has indicated their willingness to relocate and enhance this bus stop to the newly-developed Underground Railroad Center. This public transit would help Oberlin and Lorain county promote Heritage tourism, an increasingly important part of our economies.

The Underground Railroad Center would make use of the renovated Gasholder Building to promote an understanding of the importance of the Oberlin area in the national history of the Underground Railroad. This historic transportation network is an integral part of the American cultural experience. Programming in the building would include lectures, participatory activities, interactive displays, and theater and dance productions designed to raise awareness of Oberlin's unique history as Station 99 on the Underground Railroad. There would also be a permanent exhibit detailing the role of this industrial building in the world of 19th century transportation.

The Clark Brothers, Inc. construction company has offered to donate the Gasholder Building and adjacent property at such time as the City is able to develop a financial package for its restoration. Preservation of the Gasholder Building and the redevelopment of this site would clean up what is now an abandoned contractor's yard full of weeds, brush, unused fill dirt and masonry supplies, rusty storage sheds and blowing litter. The conversion of this site to an attractive park and Underground Railroad Center would greatly enhance both the adjacent commercial development and the low- and moderate-income neighborhood nearby.

Relationship to the Intermodal Transportation System

Toledo, Norwalk and Cleveland Railroad

The original Toledo, Norwalk and Cleveland Railway line built in 1851 provided commuter and freight traffic across Northern Ohio for over a century. Many small communities, including Oberlin, built their commercial and industrial infrastructure adjacent to the railroad transportation system. In Oberlin, a rail siding made it possible to off-load coal directly at the Retort for manufacture into coal gas which was piped underground to the Gasholder Building. The manufactured coal gas was placed into cylinders and stored temporarily in the Gasholder Building prior to being transported by rail to consumers. 19th and 20th century residents use this coal gas for lighting and heating. The location of the historic Gasholder Building at the railway line is an important part of the City's industrial heritage.

North Coast Inland Trail

The railway line was subsequently sold to the Penn Central Railroad, which continued to provide freight service in Northern Ohio into the (Bike/Pedestrian Path) late 1960's. The tracks through Oberlin were subsequently abandoned and the rights-of-way were ultimately purchased by the City of Oberlin and the Lorain County Metroparks. In the late 1990's, the 13.1 mile section of track from the City of Elyria southwest through Oberlin and west to Kipton was converted into a pedestrian/bicycle trail. The conversion was paid for with Federal ISTEA transportation funds. This is one section of a regional trail, which will eventually span 65 miles from Elyria to Toledo. The trail traverses the City of Oberlin from the northeast to southwest, connecting many of the City's neighborhoods and paralleling the Plum Creek corridor. The most recent estimate of the Lorain County Metroparks suggests that the Lorain County section of the North Coast Inland Trail is used by at least 90,000 people each year.

At present, there are parking facilities located at either end of the Lorain County section of the North Coast Inland Trail in Elyria and in Kipton. Although on-street parking is available adjacent to the trail in Oberlin, no specific parking is reserved for trail users. Furthermore, no public facilities with the exception of a seasonal Port-a-John in Kipton are available trail-side for trail users. It is our intention to provide a variety of services adjacent to the trail at the project site. These would include fully accessible public restrooms with drinking fountains, approximately 22 parking spaces at least two of which would be ADA-compliant, picnic facilities, air hose, bike racks and maps linking the Underground Railroad Center to other local historic sites. Oberlin would become a natural resting point near the middle of the trail, providing visitors the opportunity to relax, picnic and perhaps explore our community. See attached map.

Lorain County Transit Authority

The Lorain County Transit Authority, which provides economical public transportation throughout Lorain County, has committed (see letter) to install a bus stop near the Gasholder Building, should this project go forward. Such a transportation link would allow easy access to the project site for Lorain County residents, and with connections, to people who live far beyond

the County's borders. Lorain County Transit had 428,000 riders in 2001, and they operate seven days a week, thirteen hours a day. This public transit linkage, in addition to bicycle pedestrian and automotive access, make this Gasholder project a truly multi-modal one. Another advantage of encouraging the use of mass transit for destination like this one would be to reduce reliance by the public on the automobile.

Automotive Transportation Network

The Gasholder Building is located adjacent and directly accessible to State Route 58 (Main Street in Oberlin), which runs north and south for the length of Lorain County. Several blocks away is State Route 511 (Lorain Street), which runs east and west. Both of these State Routes intersect nearby with US Route 20 and Interstate 480 to the east linking to Cleveland, just 35 miles away. To the south, State Route 58 bisects State Routes 303, 18 and 162 in Lorain County. State Route 58 also intersects to the north with State Route 2, which becomes Interstate 90 running east and west. Additionally, there are plans in the near future for an interchange on the Ohio Turnpike (US Interstate 80) several miles north of Oberlin at State Route 58. All of these roadways provide easy access to Oberlin and the Gasholder Building. People will travel from far away to Oberlin to park their vehicle to access the North Coast Inland Trail and to visit the Gasholder Building/Underground Railroad Center. One of the goals of the park-and-ride will be to promote non-vehicular modes of transportation, and reduction in the use of automobiles.

Underground Railroad/Heritage Tourism

Oberlin has long presented for the public's enjoyment and enrichment heritage tours of Oberlin's cultural and historic assets. This effort has been led by the Oberlin Historical and Improvement Organization (O.H.I.O.). Guided tours of the restored homes and pathways of Oberlin residents throughout the City's history since its founding in 1833 have been offered for many years. Many of those recognized from the past were leaders in the abolitionist and civil rights movements. Oberlin's heritage of tolerance and freedom, as well as its specific role in an 1858 rescue by residents of a captured runaway slave, and its many years of service as Stop #99 on the Underground Railroad, are well-known and continue to be celebrated. Increasingly, people are interested in the dramatic story of the abolitionist movement and the Underground Railroad, with all of the sacrifices, risks, hardships and moral stands that comprised it. Consequently, many people have chosen to visit the actual locations where this history was made in order to try to better understand and appreciate it. Guided tours and other educational endeavors have arisen as a way to accommodate this interest. O.H.I.O. has plans to develop a well-marked "Heritage Trail" linking historical buildings and sites within Oberlin. Through history-telling signs, guided footpaths and informative brochures, the visitors to Oberlin will be able to walk or bike through some of America's key historic sites and learn what Oberlin history has to offer. The Gasholder Building and Underground Railroad Center would become a prominent stop along this trail. Visitors will also learn about places to shop, dine, view art, attend concerts and plays, and other rewarding and unique cultural experiences. Besides O.H.I.O., the Lorain County Visitor's Bureau features an African-American Heritage bus tour within Lorain County, featuring a number of stops in Oberlin. A new Underground Railroad Center would be a highlight of any of the Visitor Bureau's future tours.

Objective 1: Multi-Modal Transportation Center

Site Context

The “Gasholder House” is located on property located to the east of South Main Street (State Route 58), to the south of Edison Street and to the west of South Pleasant Street in the “Southeast Quadrant” of the City of Oberlin. The subject site is bisected by a former railway right-of-way. That railway right-of-way was first owned by the Toledo, Norwalk and Cleveland Railroad and the rail-line was built in 1851. This line served as a vital link between Cleveland and Chicago. In 1866, the Lake Shore and Michigan Southern Railway constructed a rail lines from Elyria to Oberlin that continued west using the T.N. and C. RR right-of-way. Those rail-lines provided both freight and passenger service to the community and surrounding area. As was the case in many urban settings, a commercial and industrial area soon developed adjacent to the rail-line. That railway provided the means to transport coal to this site and the “Gasholder House” that was used to store gas manufactured for local use. Although many of the buildings formerly associated with the railway have been lost over time, a railroad passenger depot still exists a short distance to the west of this site across South Main Street. This line was subsequently part of the Penn Central RR before being abandoned in the late 1960's.

Road System

South Main Street is part of the state highway system (State Route 58) which provides connections to other streets within the City as well as to areas in the north and south portions of the County. State Route 58 connects with other east-west State Routes in the overall area including State Route 511 (Lorain Street) in the City as well as to State Route 113 to the north in Amherst and State Route 18 to the south in Wellington. In addition, that State Route 58 also connects with United States Route 20 in Oberlin, and to Interstate 480 and the Ohio Turnpike (Interstate 80). Interstate 480 in turn provides a freeway connection to Cleveland Hopkins International Airport, the City of Cleveland and to Interstate 71. The Turnpike Authority is also finalizing plans for the construction of a new interchange at State Route 58, a short distance to the north of Oberlin.

South Main Street is designated as an “Arterial Street” in the City’s Comprehensive Plan while South Pleasant Street is designated as a “Collector Street”. Edison Street is identified as a “local street” in the Comprehensive Plan. The present road system provides more than adequate access to the subject site.

Bicycle System

The City of Oberlin is a “bike friendly community” and the use of bicycles is encouraged for both transportation and recreational purposes.

With the abandonment of the former Penn Central Railroad line and right-of-way, this right-of-way was acquired by the City of Oberlin and Lorain County Metro Parks for the future development of a bicycle/ pedestrian trail. In the 1998, a 13.1 mile section of the former railway

right-of-way between Elyria and Kipton and through the City of Oberlin was converted and opened to such use. The development of that trail was made possible through the use of ISTEA funding.

The City of Oberlin maintains about 3.1 miles of the trail while the remainder is maintained by Lorain County Metro Parks. That trail passes by the former "Gasholder House". It is also noted that in 1992, seven Metro Park Districts agreed to develop a system of connecting trails in northwest Ohio, each to be managed by local jurisdictions. Those trails are at various stages of development at this time and the Oberlin section of trail will eventually become part of a much larger regional trail system that will be about 65 miles in length running between Elyria and Toledo.

While the trail provides important linkages to communities within and ultimately outside of Lorain County, this trail provides equally important direct transportation connections to many of the City neighborhoods, to historic properties listed on the National Register, to the downtown historic district and to Oberlin College. The City is in the process of providing a future bicycle route loop that will provide enhanced bicycle access to the downtown and College as well as to the City's 77 acre Hamilton Road recreation complex.

A recent estimate from Lorain County Metroparks suggests that the Lorain County section of the "North Coast Inland Trail" is used annually by at least 90,000 persons.

Sidewalks

South Main Street (SR 58), South Pleasant Street and Edison Street are all developed with public sidewalks which provide extensive connections to nearby residential neighborhoods, historic sites, the historic downtown and Oberlin College.

Public Transportation

Public transportation within the City of Oberlin is provided by the Lorain County Transit Authority. The provision of public transportation services is of real importance to many in the community. This public transportation service operates seven (7) days a week and service is available thirteen (13) hours a day. The transit system provided 428,000 rides in 2001 and it is anticipated that ridership in 2002 will remain at least at that level.

Lorain County Transit (LCT) has several routes that serve Oberlin thereby providing transportation options within the community as well as connections to nearby communities. Lorain County Transit has advised that it is prepared to install a bus stop near the "Gasholder House" as this project moves forward. Such a bus stop would provide direct access to the subject site thereby providing an important link between the project site and to other communities within the County. In addition, LCT also provides bus service to Cuyahoga County thereby potentially providing a commuter linkage to residents there.

The operations of LCT providing public transportation to this site are considered to be an

important part of the community's overall integrated transportation network. Along with motor vehicle access to the site, the adjacent bicycle/ pedestrian path and extensive public sidewalks in the area, the provision of public transportation truly makes this project a multi-modal one.

Objective 2: Preservation and Adaptive Re-use of the Gasholder Building

Town History

Oberlin and Oberlin College were co-established in 1833 as a college town. Both quickly gained a national reputation as being bastions for civil liberties and rights. Oberlin is well known for its role in promoting the end of slavery and has been called the “town that started the Civil War”. Oberlin was long an important stop on the “Underground Railway” for slaves seeking freedom, and many National Register historic sites are associated with that struggle for freedom.

As a progressive community, a local gas company was established in 1858 and Oberlin was one of the first towns in the area to have gaslit streets. Although by the 1880's, electric lighting was becoming increasingly popular in the community and nation, many homeowners had both electric and gas lights installed even as late as 1910.

Gasholder Building

The “Gasholder House” building was constructed in 1889 by a contractor from Cincinnati for Albert H. Johnson, president of the Oberlin Gas Lighting Company. It was designed and used to store locally-manufactured coal gas. This building was sited next to the former railway line passing through the City. Shipments of coal to this site were thereby facilitated to this location. That gas was first used for lighting and heating and eventually was used in gas-powered stoves.

The Oberlin “Gasholder House” has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places for its significance in both the history of the industry and architecture. The “Gasholder House” is one of the few remaining gasholder houses in the country and the **only** known brick gasholder structure remaining to the west of the Appalachian Mountains. It is also one of the few known industrial structures of its era remaining in central and southern Lorain County.

The “Gasholder House” is a rare survivor from the era when manufactured coal gas provided lighting and heating in nearly all late 19th century American cities. In response to changing market conditions, the owner of this property converted the company to the “Oberlin Gas and Electric Company” and the town’s new electric streetlights were first illuminated on September 28, 1893. Coal gas did, however, continue to be used for heating until natural gas became available in 1911. It appears that this gasholder facility remained in use until 1918 when the Oberlin Gas and Electric Company began to purchase power from the Lorain County Electric Company. That source of power was subsequently replaced with electric power generation at the City’s nearby power plant on South Professor Street in July, 1934. The building demonstrates how fast advances in technology occurred in late 19th and early 20th century America, as it was no longer used for the purpose for which it was built within thirty years of the date of its completion.

A 1989 article by Mary E. Pyne identified thirteen (13) remaining gasholder houses in New England, one in Troy, New York, and the “Gasholder House” in Oberlin, Ohio as the only remaining such brick structures in the country. That article noted that nearly all of the gasholder houses constructed were round brick buildings with a conical slate roof and a ventilation cupola

for leaking gas to escape. In 1989, only one of the extant gasholder houses (located in Concord, New Hampshire) remains intact as a gasholder house. All other have been converted to other uses or are vacant.

The technology of manufacturing coal gas was invented in Europe in the early 18th century. It was in use in New England textile mills by the War of 1812. Gaslight made it possible to keep mills or other businesses in operation after dark, thereby increasing productivity. Gaslight was soon in use for street lighting in most American cities including Oberlin and as noted above was used in many homes. Unlike in Oberlin, some New England cities manufactured coal gas until the early 1950's when it was replaced by more efficient natural gas brought in via pipelines from the South and Southwest. Only a small portion of the gasholders built were sheltered by houses to protect them from the elements and to make them look more presentable and less industrial. These houses often featured fine masonry craftsmanship that was not usually seen in industrial buildings.

Adaptive Re-use

The Oberlin "Gasholder House" building eventually ceased to be used a for the manufacture of coal gas. It may have remained vacant or underutilized once production ceased near the end of World War I, and it then continued to be used for industrial purposes as part of a lumber yard operation in the 1930's . That use could also take advantage of the site's location adjacent to the railway line and near State Route 58. Clark Brothers Construction Company has owned the building since the 1960's. Although many in the community refer to the building as the "Round House", it was never used as a railway structure.

The "Gasholder House" continues to stand as a symbol of industrial design and craftsmanship. The community holds this building dear to its heart as a reminder of past technology and the community's built heritage. This building continues as an important visual attribute to the neighborhood and community. Neglect over the years has, however, taken its toll on the structure and there is a real need for intervention to prevent its further decline.

The community has identified that the "Gasholder House" should be rehabilitated and transformed into a building that once again serves the needs of the neighborhood and city. In this regard, the celebration of Oberlin's important role as part of the "Underground Railroad" is seen as being of importance beyond the community and the "Gasholder House" could be adapted to use as an "Underground Railroad" center. Such a transformation would, however, only be possible with outside financial assistance. As mentioned above, this property's location along transportation corridors was undoubtedly an important factor in its initial development as a manufacturing plant for coal gas. Those same transportation corridors have now evolved from railway lines to the "Inland Bike Path" with connections to the City's neighborhoods, historic downtown district as well as to other communities in the County and beyond.

Objective 3: Development of the Underground Railroad Center

To promote an understanding of the importance of the Oberlin area to the Underground Railroad, the historic transportation network which helped fugitive slaves find their way to freedom in the northern states and Canada.

Cultural Center

The Underground Railroad Center will become Oberlin's center for African-American cultural activities such as the annual Juneteenth Festival, Martin Luther King Day Celebrations, as well as highlighting the birthdays of local and national persons who aided in the cause of abolition.

Gasholder House

Located in the center will be an exhibit relating the history and importance of the historic Gasholder House in which the center is located.

History

We will host programs and activities that would feature different events and eras in African-American history. In 1835, in order to escape financial ruin, Oberlin College voted to accept black men and women as students, thus began the history of African-Americans in Oberlin. The desire for education was the impetus for many African-Americans who came to Oberlin following this decision. Others came fleeing oppression and enslavement. All left their mark on the Oberlin community. People of color would purchase land near transportation routes such as the North Coast Inland Trail which ran the New York Central railway.

Community

It is our hope that the proposed education center would feature activities and programs that would present Oberlin's African-American citizens of Oberlin, many of who may descendants from early settlers.

Other UGRR Center Uses:

- Self-serve visitors/welcome information booth located in the park so that bikers and other after-hour visitors can always have access to information pertaining to the center and the rest of Oberlin.
- Full serviced, modern restroom facilities.
- Running a shuttle between the Gasholder building and Westwood cemetery with the understanding that all of this is coordinated as a part of the Oberlin Heritage Trail and tours.
- Develop slave route-maps for display.
- Several specific means to embrace Oberlin's role in the Underground Railroad through exhibits, artifacts, genealogy, tours, theatre, dance and storytelling as follows:
 - Connect to the Statewide Underground Railroad Network through the National Park Service.
 - Retracing routes into, and out of, the Oberlin area.
 - Document and establish a route of Underground Railroad houses, or other buildings.
- Interactive exhibits and displays that draw from the latest in computer technology.
- Dynamic arts programming including theatre and dance.
- Live teaching with workshop residencies on art and culture.
- The main level could be used to house the main exhibits and interactive displays pertaining to the UGRR in Oberlin and Ohio history.

Collaboration

The following organizations or sources will be asked to participate, collaborate, or lend resources, as is appropriate to each organization, but not limited to:

Locally:

- Oberlin College Center for Service and Learning
- Oberlin Historical and Improvement Organization
- Oberlin School System
- The MAD Factory (Music, Arts, Drama)
- Oberlin Churches
- Lorain County Visitors Bureau
- Lorain County Historical Society
- Oberlin Race Relations
- Professional Negro Business Woman Association
- Lorain County Metro Parks

State and National Level

- Cleveland Restoration Society/Preservation Resource Center

- National Trust for Historic Preservation Midwest Regional Office
- American Association of Museums
- American Association for State and Local History
- Great Lakes Historical Society
- Thomas Conlin Educational Foundation in Cincinnati
- Ohio Humanities Council
- Friends of Freedom
- National Underground Railroad Freedom Center
- Ohio Historical Society
- Ohio Historic Preservation Office
- Ohio Museums Association
- Ohio Preservation Alliance
- Western Reserve Historical Society
- National Trust for Historic Preservation
- National Park Service