

## Oberlin Underground Railroad Center and Park-N-Ride Project Underway

Construction on the Oberlin Underground Railroad Center (OURC) and Park-N-Ride Project has begun!

On October 21, 2011, Oberlin City Council passed the ordinance accepting the bid of R.W. Clark Company Inc. for the exterior renovation and rehabilitation of the Gasholder Building, the first stage of the long-awaited construction.

Construction to replace just the roof was scheduled to complete this fall, but FHWA (Federal Highway Administration) changed the requirements to dictate that the exterior walls and roof be completed at the same time. Unfortunately, that meant the City needed to raise additional matching grant funds before construction could begin, or risk losing grant money. The Underground Railroad Center Implementation Team's (URCIT) fundraising sub-team has raised matching funds (nearly \$80,000) and secured the federal grant for this phase of the project.

"The money was raised by a \$50,000 allocation from City Council and the rest of it was community fundraising," Assistant City Manager and OURC Project Coordinator Darlene Colaso said.

The construction of the OURC will consist of three phases. The first is the exterior renovation, the outside brick walls and the roof. R.W. Clark Company has already removed what was left of the 120+ year-old roof and it was discovered that the wood decking was in surprisingly good condition, despite the deterioration of the original slate roof.

The second phase will be more exterior work that includes the park and ride area along the North Coast Inland Bicycle Trail, public restrooms, a bike shelter for cyclists (sponsored by Oberlin Rotary), a picnic shelter and interpretive garden areas throughout the grounds. The Oberlin Underground Railroad Center Implementation Team (URCIT) is currently reviewing site plans that include various options for site layout.

Phase three will be interior renovations.

"This project is incredibly unique – and not just because of Oberlin's rich Underground Railroad history," Colaso said. "You also have the park-and-ride project feature, which appeals to the cyclists, and the history that is the Gasholder Building itself. It's important to remember that this is one of the only gasholder buildings still standing west of the Allegheny Mountains."

According to Colaso, the project is 100% contingent upon fundraising. The City will still need to raise an additional \$150,000 to meet the match to secure the total amount (\$917,600) of the federal grant dollars (being administered through NOACA [Northeast Ohio Area Coordinating Agency] and ODOT [Ohio Department of transportation]), but she feels the public will once again rally behind the project now that physical work has begun. "Sometimes it takes something people can actually *see*, before people *believe* that it's really going to happen! There's a lot to believe in now."

Aside from the actual construction process having begun, so many things have recently transpired on this project. Three months ago, Oberlin Rotary approached the City about sponsoring a shelter for North Coast Inland Trail cyclists. Project plans for that shelter are now being coordinated with the URCIT and the architects. About that same time, the City was awarded a Bill Long Foundation (BLF) grant to fund an informational kiosk that would feature project information and a City map for easier access to the downtown businesses. Just two weeks ago, Lorain County JVS students from the Computerized Design/Drafting and Carpentry classes were onsite with a full-size prototype of the informational kiosk that will be installed on the gasholder property's grounds. This kiosk, funded with BLF grant dollars, with matching funds from Theodore Nowick and Robert Taylor, was not only

designed by, but is being built to specifications by, JVS students. Just this past week, the City received a letter of support along with a financial commitment from Oberlin College for the project.

“There’s a huge sense of relief that we’re moving forward. It’s taken a long time. It’s really a show of what people who care about a project can do when they dedicate themselves,” said Colaso.

For more information or to contribute to the OURC Project, please visit [www.cityofoberlin.com](http://www.cityofoberlin.com) or call 440-775-7205.

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