

OBERLIN NEWS-TRIBUNE

Council offers annual support to Underground Railroad site

After telling to Underground Center Implementation team to raise money, get the project moving, and do something now, city council has voted to help with that first priority.

At their Sept. 7 meeting, council heard a report from the implementation team anticipating a community update on progress toward repurposing the Gasholder building as an Underground Railroad interpretive center. Assistant city manager Darlene Colaso said the team has found money with the reauthorization of a \$917,000 federal transportation grant originally granted in 2002.

Colaso said construction documents are being prepared for stabilizing the structure, and work could begin as soon as next year. She said the implementation team will announce a fundraising plan in the next couple months.

“We have found money, we’re moving forward as quickly as possible, and we are doing something now,” Colaso said.

Barb Bickel, executive director of Visit Lorain County and a member of the implementation team, said she has seen high interest in Oberlin and the Underground Railroad from around the country. She said more tourists come to Oberlin for information about the Underground Railroad than for any other reason.

“This center, when it is complete, will provide a place for them to come and learn about the Underground Railroad,” Bickel said.

According to the group, after the structure is stabilized, another \$2 million will be needed to repurpose the Gasholder building as an interpretive center and museum. Council vice president Sharon Soucy said the city could help raise that money, and made a motion to allocate \$50,000 from the 2011 income tax capital improvement fund to support efforts to stabilize the structural integrity of the Gasholder building.

Her motion further suggested councils endeavor to provide a 25 percent match to dollars raised by fundraising efforts, up to \$50,000 per year in the 2012, 2013, and 2014 budgets. The motion passed unanimously.

On Saturday, members of the implementation team hosted a community update at the site of the Gasholder building on South Main Street, Colaso and team member George Abram hosted the event which included music, refreshments and a look inside the building. The city also awarded plaques to the Clark family which owned, and then donated, the property on which the Gasholder is built to the city, the Oberlin Heritage Center, and resident Tony Mealy for supporting the project to preserve the structure.