

History of the Oberlin Underground Railroad Center Project

In a nutshell, this was an opportunity to raise funds to preserve Oberlin's historic Gasholder Building and to *really* put Oberlin on the map.

The Oberlin Underground Railroad Center regarded "a cherished vision" will mark its 10-year anniversary since various individuals and groups started meeting on the project. Things began in 1997 with the introduction of the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Act. Congressman Sherrod Brown was an original cosponsor of this bill.

Foundation was further laid when Brown wrote a letter to The Honorable Rob Portman on June 19, 1997 asking him to consider adding several historical sites in Oberlin which played a role in the Underground Railroad network, to the National Park Service's educational materials.

In 1999 when federal funding seemed likely, a group of concerned citizens, began to meet. The Interagency Council was the convener. A.H Kenny Clark was also being approached about the transference of the Gasholder Building to the City of Oberlin. On May 20, 1999 the City held its first public meeting about the Underground Railroad Center project. The meeting did not go well. In the fall of 2000 Zion Community Development Center became the new convener and an Underground Railroad Committee was created. This committee subsequently turned into the Underground Railroad Development Committee, with the City retaking the lead. The Interagency Council disbands due to a lack of diversity

On March 22, 2002 Rob DiSpirito, City Manager announces NOACA funding likely for OURC. The City Manager receives a notice dated June 5, 2002 about the NOACA Grant opportunity. The UR Development Committee meets vigorously to make the July 12th application deadline.

There was consensus the City's application would be stronger if it included a program component. Oberlin's grassroots and African-American community provided such a program. This group would go on to become Friends of the Oberlin Underground Railroad Center, (FOURC) Inc. and exempt organization effective October 1, 2003

The Purpose of FOURC is to support grassroots involvement in the development and operations of the OURC. However, since the face of the original OURC group has changed and mission statement expanded, the group has never felt the same support and enthusiasm to complete the project as existed before.

In 2005, the City convenes a Design Team to assist with the OURC project. The design team consisted of representatives from Oberlin Heritage Center, Historic Preservation Commission and FOURC. George Abrams, an African-American was asked to facilitate these meetings. Charles Peterson, also African –American was appointed the liaison to Council. The group experienced peaks and valleys, and more valleys than peaks! There have been at least two moratoriums called on meetings. The group recently resumed meeting in Spring 2008.