

**ILLINOIS AMERICA 250 COMMISSION
COMMISSION MEETING**

January 17, 2024, 12:00 p.m.

**Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum
212 N 6th St, Springfield, IL 62701**

and

Webex

Attending: Officer: Chair Gabrielle (Gabe) Lyon; **Commission Members:** Ada Cheng, Michelle Donahoe, Jenn Edginton, Jessica Harris (Webex), Sara Phalen (Webex), Gerald Savage, Christina Shutt, Dick Simpson, Amber Smock (Webex), and Nikki Williams Rucker; **Department of Natural Resources staff:** Meghan Lindstrom; members of the public: Erin Drain, Michael Inman, Melinda McCrary, Kayla Pilgrim, and Chris Wills.

I. Welcome

Chair Gabe Lyon called the meeting to order at 12:09 p.m.

II. Roll Call

A roll was called and a quorum was present.

Gabe thanked the Commissioners for their willingness to travel for the Commission retreat. She invited Commissioners to introduce themselves and share any work their organizations are planning for America 250.

Amber Smock joined the meeting at 12:14 pm.

III. Review November 18 Commission Meeting Minutes

The Minutes from the November 18 meeting were presented for approval. Gerald Savage moved to approve the Minutes, Christina Shutt seconded, and the Minutes were approved unanimously.

Melinda McCrary joined the meeting at 12:31 pm.

IV. Chair's Update

Gabe provided an overview of the topics of discussion for the retreat. The goals were to finalize the Commission's priority projects, discuss and vote on a fundraising target, and identify strategic outreach partners and funding opportunities.

Gabe reported that Illinois Humanities' Road Scholars program had relaunched with an America 250 component. Their chosen theme was “reimagining the American dream”.

Gabe reported on the Commission's successful press announcement held that morning at the Illinois State Library. She thanked everyone involved in organizing the press announcement and all who were in attendance.

Gabe reviewed the Commission's mandate to “develop, encourage, and execute an inclusive commemoration and observance of the founding of the United States of America, and Illinois' imperative role in the nation's history.”

Gabe emphasized the amount of work the Commission needed to complete and the short timeframe. She explained they would focus this year on developing material and programs and encouraging the work of other organizations while next year would be focused on deliverables.

Gabe shared that work is ongoing to create a program calendar and website of 250th events, exhibits, and educational resources, a partners page and associated toolkits, a suite of social media sites, and an Illinois America 250 Commemorations Toolkit designed to support local celebrations and commemorations to be inclusive and accessible. The chosen deadline for the Commemorations Toolkit is July 4, 2025, so that it can be shared out

Erin Drain shared a preview of the partners page for the Commission's website.

Dick Simpson expressed concern that people might see the press announcement and assume there is only a State component to the Commission's work. He recommended some clarification to make it more obvious the Commission is connecting with local groups and the communications toolkit will be available to them.

Michelle Donahoe asked if she should forward any local news releases about the press announcement to Erin. Gabe agreed and recommended all Commissioners send them any public information they encounter where the Commission or its work is mentioned. She also recommended the Commissioners share the press announcement with their local connections with the logos and Commission letterhead.

Sara Phalen stated that there are two sign-ups for Illinois America 250 online

and one leads to the National America 250 website. She was concerned that the Commission would be unable to access any gathered data from that site. Gabe stated she was aware of the other site and she was looking into it.

Gabe reported that robust toolkits are being developed for Commissioners to share the work of the Commission. She anticipates they will be completed by July and will include a list of different events being planned around the state.

Gabe reported that the highest interest in America 250 so far had come from museums and history centers, libraries, regional tourism hubs, and institutions of higher education. She also reported that a great deal of activity for America 250 is being planned by Chicago culture and community organizations. Gabe asked the Commissioners to share any other groups they had encountered who were already planning for America 250.

Michelle reported that she had seen an increase in interest in schools and she has been sharing information about national America 250's field trip programs with them.

Elisa reported she had received a few inquiries about the economic side of America 250 and she has directed them to the website. Most were searching for grant opportunities.

Ada Cheng reported that people have expressed interest in America 250 but it is unclear how they can be involved. Ada recommended the Commission create specific suggestions on how institutions can participate even if they are stretched thin in their resources and personnel. Gabe said that the website would soon include more information on how people can get involved and a resource page. Ideally Gabe would like to have someone available to answer the public's questions about America 250 and walk them through the suggestions, but capacity is an issue. She believes the future partners kit will help by sharing information about the partners looking to share ideas and resources.

Gabe shared future tables and info sessions opportunities through July 2025. She plans to have information about the Commission at every relevant conference, including a return to the national America250 conference in Washington.

Michael Inman joined the meeting at 12:56 pm.

Gerald stated that he would be a speaker at the annual Flock to the Rock event at Rock Falls and he could share information about the Commission there. He also recommended the Commission reach out to county historical societies to inquire if they are interested in sharing information about the Commission. Gabe stated there were plans to create an information page with a QR code to the website which could be shared with interested organizations.

Updates and Progress

Gabe proposed the Commission discuss the four signature programs which have emerged from the working groups.

Marketing: Illinois Passport

Sara described the Kane-DuPage Passport to Adventure program and how the Commission could create a statewide version. The passport offers incentives for both tourists and locals to visit more sites. She stated that creating a physical booklet is an opportunity for more institutions to participate in America 250, especially if they do not have the capacity to join the larger commemoration. Sara recommended this also be considered to extend beyond America 250 to continue showcasing Illinois' historical and cultural assets.

Gabe asked Jenn Edginton how the concept looked from the ISM and IDNR perspective. Jenn reported that the Illinois State Museum has been working on a similar project to network with the State Historic Sites and she hoped that a passport project would help them develop better connections.

Gabe reported that she had discussed a passport program with the Illinois Destinations Association and they were very receptive to the project and suggested themed passports such as Route 66 or the Underground Railroad.

Youth Engagement: What are you willing to throw tea in the harbor for?

Nikki Williams Rucker reported that the Youth Engagement group had decided on Project Soapbox with the theme “What are you willing to throw tea in the harbor for?” Young people will be challenged to consider what they care about in their communities and what they want to do about it. It would be a research-based project so they will be challenged to consider tangible answers. Submissions would not be restrained to a single medium so they could include speeches, music, and art pieces. One outstanding issue for the working group is finding a location or locations to house submissions. Another outstanding issue is ensuring people throughout Illinois have an

equal opportunity to participate, which may lead to travel expenses which also require permissions and chaperones. More time is needed to coordinate that and identify and address other potential problems.

Dick inquired about a youth summit. Nikki said they considered one run by Mikva Challenge but it would take at least a year to plan, handle logistics, and secure sponsorships. It would be more feasible to run several summits throughout the state to make it more equitable but that would still require more planning.

Gabe said that the Project Soapbox proposal is feasible and the scope manageable and that other details such as the location and transportation can be discussed at another date.

Education: Illinois America 250th Chronicles

Gabe reported there had been many inquiries about what Illinois America 250 can offer teachers and how the Illinois State Board of Education is involved. She said the Education group has been brainstorming how to gather all the parts in a fun and engaging way, while also completing the work before the start of the next school year. Michelle described the proposed Illinois America 250th Chronicles, an educational publication that explores and celebrates the wide range of people, cultures, and events that built our state and contributed to our Nation's history. It is a 64 color newspaper prominently featuring a timeline and containing articles about important moments in Illinois history, written as if they were happening in the current day. Using newspaper as the medium is an intentional choice as it is relatively affordable and reduces screen time in the classroom. Michelle also recommended creating a teachers guide modeled after one made for the Bicentennial. Gabe recommended this project with a particular primary writer and editor in Chicago who could complete the project with a budget of around \$40,000.

Gabe stated that the working group is still considering how to best reach the library community and create and distribute reading lists, possibly in conjunction with the newspaper project.

Michael Inman left the meeting at 1:15 pm.

Commemorations: Grants

Gabe reported the commemorations working group is discussing grants with the Illinois Arts Council Agency. The Agency does not currently offer grants specifically about America 250 but are considering ways to include 250 in its

existing grants.

The Commission took a recess at 1:19 pm.

The meeting resumed at 1:29 pm.

Dick told the Commission about a steering committee being developed at the University of Illinois at Chicago that can be used as a template for other institutions of higher learning to share curriculum, speakers, and experts. Jessica Harris reported she is preparing to reach out to the system office to ensure the Southern Illinois Universities are aligned with other universities across the state.

Budget Priorities

Gabe proposed the Commission establish a fundraising target of the funds needed to support the three signature projects that can be reasonably achieved. This goal would be reached by State appropriations, sponsors, and donations. Dick recommended the Commission establish specific expected costs for each project. He used the example of hiring part time staff to run a small grant program and determining the necessary salaries. He recommended the Commission create a budget with clearly defined line items and estimated costs before committing to any funding.

Gabe clarified that she currently wants to establish a dollar amount that could cover the three main subject priorities. She suggested one million dollars would be enough to fund all the projects, from both State and private funding.

Christina requested clarification on who would be managing the grants as that could affect the total amount of funding that would be available. Gabe clarified that the dollar amount being decided was not related to grants and was only estimating the amount of money needed to fund the passport program, Project Soapbox, and the Illinois America 250th Chronicles. She stated that the Commission could encourage other agencies to offer grants related to the 250th but not planning to run their own grant program.

Jenn stated that by statute the Commission was not a granting committee. She clarified that the Commission could accept grants and other monetary gifts which would be deposited into a fund in the Treasury department.

Jessica left the meeting at 1:40 pm.

Gabe proposed the Commission establish a fundraising goal of one million dollars to be raised from State and private sources. Michelle moved to approve the goal, Nikki seconded, and the motion passed.

Outreach and Partnership Opportunities

Gabe proposed the Commissioners identify organizations that the Commission could reach out to for outreach, partnership opportunities, and fundraising. The Commission took several minutes to brainstorm and considered a wide range of potential partners throughout Illinois and in neighboring states.

Jenn cautioned Commissioners who are also State employees to be mindful of doing fundraising activities while on State time.

Michelle reminded the Commission of the upcoming day of community service scheduled in Wisconsin to commemorate the 250th.

Kayla Pilgrim introduced herself and provided information on her experience in Chicago youth organizations. Gabe thanked her for joining the youth working group.

V. Public Comment

Melinda introduced herself and described the interest Illinois America 250 has raised in the cultural heritage field. She emphasized the need for funding for events and programming since the federal government did not release any funding for the anniversary.

Melinda left the meeting at 2:06 p.m.

VI. Adjournment

Elisa Marcus moved to end the meeting, Ada and Jenn seconded, and the meeting was adjourned at 2:08 p.m.