

**ILLINOIS AMERICA 250 COMMISSION**  
**COMMISSION MEETING**  
**March 24, 2025, 2:00 p.m.**

**Webex**

**Attending: Officer:** Chair Gabrielle (Gabe) Lyon; **Commission Members:** Brad Cole, Michelle Donahoe, Jenn Edginton, Jessica Harris, Lindsay Laren, Elisa Marcus, Sara Phalen, Christina Shutt, Dick Simpson, and Andy Van Meter; **Department of Natural Resources staff:** Jayette Bolinski, Meghan Lindstrom, and George Sisk; members of the public: Jan Devore, Amy Kellum, and John Wilson.

**I. Welcome**

Chair Gabe Lyon called the meeting to order at 2:03 p.m.

**II. Roll Call**

Meghan Lindstrom called the roll and a quorum was present.

**III. Review January 17 Commission Meeting Minutes**

The Minutes from the January 17 meeting were presented for approval. Sara Phalen moved to approve the Minutes, Elisa Marcus seconded, and the Minutes were approved unanimously.

**IV. New Business**

**Chair's Update**

Gabe welcomed Lindsay Laren to her first Commission meeting. Commissioners gave brief introductions of themselves.

Gabe informed the Commission that Amber Smock had resigned but was willing to advise the Commission on matters of accessibility in the future. She asked Commissioners to send her information about any potential new Commissioners who have experience in accessibility and inclusion practices.

Gabe reviewed the priorities that had been identified at the January meeting. The first was that Commissioners need more tools for more effective and efficient outreach. The second was to work with local tourism agencies to identify and uplift existing America 250 planning efforts across the state. The third priority was to secure funding to support the signature programs chosen by the working groups.

Gabe reported that an appropriations request for one million dollars had been submitted to the Governor's Office but there were no funds appropriated for the Commission in the proposed Budget for Fiscal Year 2026. Since there was no funding to support the signature programs yet efforts had shifted to promoting and encouraging existing programs and partners.

Dick Simpson asked if Senator Doris Turner could submit a budget amendment to secure funding for the Commission. Gabe stated she would discuss that option with Senator Turner.

Dick recommended the Commission search for funding from other sources such as foundations or the national America 250 Commission in order to hire staff to coordinate the signature projects.

Gabe clarified that the Commission is not a fundraising entity but they would need to search for available funding. She has been in contact with national America 250 which is also seeking appropriations from Congress. The Illinois America 250 Commission's projects have been added to their funding directory including "a publication that is specific to this moment in Illinois". Gabe is also reaching out to local foundations in Illinois and has asked the Governor's team to help make those introductions.

Michelle Donahoe left the meeting at 2:16 p.m.

Gabe requested all Commissioners work their networks to continue spreading the word about the upcoming anniversary, to alert her if any potential funding opportunities are found, and gather information about events being planned for the anniversary so the Commission can add them to the website's calendar. Gabe reported that she would be focused on finding additional resources and funding. In the absence of more funding Gabe recommended the Commission focus on raising awareness of the anniversary and promoting and encouraging existing America 250 commemoration efforts.

Michelle rejoined the meeting at 2:17 p.m.

### **Priority Outreach**

Gabe shared her screen. She shared four new main priorities for the Commission identified at the January meeting as engaging youth, promoting local commemorations, uplifting local stories and places, and recognizing service.

Gabe invited other Commissioners to share the work they are doing to promote America 250.

Christina Shutt confirmed that the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum's annual youth art contest run in partnership with the Illinois State Board of Education would be America 250 themed in 2026. There will be a call for student contributions in early spring with an award ceremony in Springfield. Gabe commended the new project and looked forward to sharing it with national America 250.

Elisa shared that she was focused on outreach and had introduced Gabe to Cornerstone Group. She has continued to build out internal communication from a tourism perspective. Gabe reported that she is working with Erin Drain to organize Elisa's suggestions into themes and will later work with the president of the Illinois Museum Association to determine gaps. This will be presented to the Commission for review at the April meeting. Gabe anticipates this project will be completed and returned to Enjoy Illinois in time to activate for the summer.

Brad Cole reported that a model resolution had been distributed to cities, villages, towns, and municipalities to adopt in support of the commemoration. Links to the Commission's website were also provided so they could sign up as partner organizations. Brad intends to meet with county and township associations the next week to see if they would want to modify the resolutions or use them as is for their membership. He cautioned the Commission that responses may take time considering some village and city boards meet only once a month.

Lindsay reported that she had met with people from all three library systems in Illinois. She plans to convene a statewide working group in April to brainstorm how all libraries can be involved in Illinois America 250. Dick offered to assist Lindsay to connect with universities and provide book lists.

Dick reported that DePaul University was considering becoming a partner institution. DePaul and several other public universities are drafting templates of lectures, courses, and other America 250 themed events which could be held in the next year. Dick also recommended the Commission reach out to religious organizations to encourage them to become partners.

### **Review of Spring Timeline and Key Benchmarks**

Gabe requested that Commissioners continue to network and focus on outreach through June to get more people invested in America 250. She set July as the date the Commission should be ready to launch a statewide calendar of programs, a set of detailed themed calendars, and additional message points. She also recommended the Commission prepare educational outreach and resources before September. Gabe reminded the Commissioners that these goals could be reevaluated and revised at any time in the event that funding is found.

Dick recommended the Commission focus on the July 4th weekends in both 2025 and 2026 and treat the intervening year like an election cycle leading up to climax on July 4th, 2026, but does not necessarily end on that date.

Christina recommended the Commission consider the time between Juneteenth to July 4th as an extended celebration or commemoration, to be more inclusive. Jenn Edginton seconded Christina's recommendation and suggested the Commission work to prioritize different communities' histories. Gabe invited Commissioners to contact her with suggestions on how to make those explicit.

Sara asked for clarification about the future of the working groups and recommended targets be identified to provide guidance to the work of the Commission. Gabe clarified that the working groups had been tasked with synthesizing programmatic priorities, which were outlined at the January meeting but cannot be pursued without funding. She stated that the priorities would remain but outreach in those areas did not need to be limited to Commissioners in the working groups.

Gabe opened the floor to attendees to provide input on the work the Commission could reasonably complete by July.

Michelle recommended the Commission continue to build a reading list and expand the website's function to be a clearinghouse of a wider variety of America 250 information beyond event calendars.

Jenn recommended the working groups remain and continue to focus on the four priorities voted on by the Commission. She recommended they reevaluate what each working group will focus on and identify reasonable targets outside of establishing partnerships and creating calendars.

Dick recommended the working groups continue to meet at least monthly and reported that the Education Working Group is on track to produce more results.

Gabe reminded the Commission that there was still a vacancy for Chair for the Marketing Working Group and invited Commissioners to consider volunteering for the position.

George Sisk advised the Commissioners that the working groups are considered public bodies and are subject to the Open Meetings Act.

Following the short discussion, Gabe stated that the working groups would continue to meet and she would work to bring structure to the targets for outreach, the website, and the working groups.

#### **Executive Committee**

Gabe stated that the bylaws allow the Chair to appoint officers to the Executive Committee so she had asked Brad to serve as Vice Chair and Christina to serve as Treasurer. Gabe reminded the Commissioners that the Chair of the Marketing Working Group would also have a seat on the Executive Committee.

#### **V. Public Comment**

None given.

#### **VI. Adjournment**

Andy Van Meter moved to end the meeting, Jessica Harris seconded, and the meeting was adjourned at 2:55 p.m.