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City of Ithaca: MLK Jr. Freedom Walkway details announced

Joseph Murtagh Nov 10, 2010



Tompkins County Legislator Leslyn McBean-Clairborne, part of the Martin Luther King Jr. Freedom Walkway committee, and City Planner Leslie Chatterton unveil the logo for the Freedom Walkway Tuesday, Nov. 9. (Photo by Rachel Philipson)

From civil rights to women's suffrage, upstate New York has a unique relationship to progressive movements, and Ithaca is no exception.

Seeking to raise awareness about Ithaca's rich African-American history, which includes participation in the Underground Railroad and visits from such figures as Frederick Douglas and Martin Luther King Jr., a group of community leaders have launched an initiative that will see a Martin Luther King Jr. Freedom Walkway established in the City of Ithaca.

The project grows out of the effort to rename State Street after Martin Luther King Jr., and is being spearheaded by a committee led by County Legislator Leslyn McBean-Clairborne, and staffed by city Neighborhood Planner Leslie Chatterton. The walkway will feature historic markers and will resemble guided Martin Luther King Jr. trails in other American cities, McBean-Clairborne told a packed audience at an official unveiling of the project at CSMA on Tuesday.



"The goal of this walkway is to raise awareness and commemorate the incredible African-American history we have here in Ithaca," said McBean-Clairborne. "There's also an opportunity to spur economic development, with all of the tourists the walkway will attract."

In its current incarnation, the walkway will incorporate two loops in Ithaca's historic Southside and Northside neighborhoods. The Southside loop will consist of the 100 block of Cleveland Avenue and a portion of South Plain Street, located across from the Southside Community Center, while the Northside loop will traverse sections of Court, Albany, Tioga and Buffalo streets.

The locations were chosen for their historical significance and for their cultural resonance within Ithaca's African-American community. Historical events that will be commemorated by the walkway include the establishment of the A.M.E. Zion Church in 1883, the role of African-American debating and literary clubs throughout the 19th century, the founding of the first intercollegiate Greek-fraternity for blacks in 1906 and the founding of the Southside Community Center in 1938.

Much of her personal motivation for doing this, said McBean-Clairborne, is to make sure that this kind of history is known.

"A lot of the elder African-American people in our community are passing on," she said, "and they are taking their history with them. We want to make sure the history of this community is preserved."

McBean-Clairborne emphasized, however, that the walkway is not meant to honor African-Americans alone.

"We want to be mindful that it's not just African-Americans we're celebrating here, but the contributions of others too," she said, explaining that Eleanor Roosevelt had been present at the dedication of Southside Community Center in 1938.



Plans for a sculpture honoring Martin Luther King Jr. that will be placed at the west end of the Commons also were revealed at the launch on Tuesday. Serving as a connector between the two loops, the sculpture is the work of local artist Rob Licht. It was commissioned by a local resident/business and is being facilitated by the Ithaca Downtown Alliance.

"It's a pivotal piece," said Licht. "There's a north and a south to the walkway, and right in the middle lies the sculpture. I feel so honored that I've been selected to do this."

The winner of the Martin Luther King Jr. Freedom Walkway logo contest also was announced. Shira Golding, a local graphic designer who runs a consulting firm called Shirari Industries, was the winner of the prize, which means her design will be used to represent the walkway.

"I try to promote groups that do environmental and social justice work, and I've been personally inspired by Martin Luther King throughout my life," said Golding. "So this is a big honor for me."

According to McBean-Clairborne, an expansion of the walkway is being planned for the future.

"We're looking at East Hill, South Hill, other areas of the city where we want to draw attention to this history," said McBean-Clairborne.

