

Poplar Neck holds historic position in Tubman's life

By **ABBY ANDREWS**
Staff Writer

PRESTON — The next step toward establishing a state park honoring the life of Harriet Tubman in Caroline County officially kicked off Jan. 31, when several key players gathered for lunch at the Preston Town Hall.

Among those in attendance were representatives of the Caroline County Office of Tourism, Maryland Office of Tourism Development, Morgan State University and Poplar Neck Advisory Group and a Harriet Tubman historian, who were in Preston for the Poplar Neck Visitor Experience Master Plan kick-off.

Poplar Neck, outside Preston, is composed of nearly 2,200 acres. Today, that land is divided into 88 parcels, but in the 1850s, when Tubman rescued her parents and brothers from the area, it was all owned by Dr. Anthony Thompson.

Along with sites in Dorchester County, the Poplar Neck area will be part of a 125-mile Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad Byway and the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad State Park. Federal legislation has been introduced to establish a national park as well, and sites in Poplar Neck have been determined eligible for National Historic Landmark status.

This leaves state and local officials to figure out how to tell Tubman's story to visitors to Poplar Neck, while preserving the quality of life for landowners. The state park will be unique in that private landowners will still live in it.

That is where the Poplar Neck Visitor Experience Master Plan comes in, which will look at three components — an interpretive plan, which will propose ways to tell Tubman stories near specific resources; a recreational access plan, which will look at vehicle, bicycle, pedestrian and water-based access to the area; and the economic development plan, which will identify possible business opportu-

nities related to increased tourism.

Morgan State University in Baltimore will be sending graduate students from the university's schools of economic development and architecture and landscape over the summer and fall to complete the studies on business opportunities and recreational access.

Caroline County Office of Tourism Director Kathy Mackel said she expects to have the students' reports in December, and the information will include topographical and waterway maps of the area.

Anthony Cohen, whose Menare Foundation Inc. runs an Underground Railroad immersion experience in Montgomery County that was attended by Oprah Winfrey to prepare for an acting role, is already conducting the interpretive studies, and will look at whether or not a similar immersion experience could work in Poplar Neck.

The development of the master plan costs \$65,000, most of which is going to Morgan State University, and is funded by a \$40,000 grant from the Federal Highway Administration and a \$25,000 grant from the Maryland Heritage Area Authority.

Mackel said community members can get involved by joining the Poplar Neck Advisory Group.

After lunch, all in attendance boarded a bus to go on a tour of significant sites in Poplar Neck, including Choptank, Marsh Creek, Poplar Neck Farm and the Mt. Pleasant Cemetery, led by Dr. Kate Clifford Larson, who has written a book about Tubman and has contracted with the state tourism office.

Two free, public informational events about the upcoming Harriet Tubman initiatives are planned in Caroline and Dorchester counties.

The first event was held from 6:30 to 8 p.m. yesterday at the Preston Town Hall on Back Landing Road. A second meeting is scheduled from 5 to 6:30 p.m. Feb. 10 at the Cambridge City Council Chambers on Gay Street.