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BUSINESS COURIER

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Slab of history to find home in Cincinnati

Business Courier of Cincinnati - by [Jon Newberry](#) Staff Reporter

Twenty years after gleeful Germans began tearing down a monument to totalitarian imprisonment, Cincinnati is preparing to put a piece of the Berlin Wall back up as a monument to freedom.

A couple things need to happen first, however, and the clock is ticking.

Plans are under way to permanently install a 4-by-13-foot section of the infamous concrete barriers, perhaps on the south side plaza of the **National Underground Railroad Freedom Center**, said Richard Schade, a professor of German studies at the **University of Cincinnati** who serves as the city's honorary consul for the German government. Other proposals being considered came from the **Cincinnati Museum Center** and Cincinnati Parks, which wants to place it in Eden Park's Liberty Garden.

Schade initiated efforts to obtain the wall segment from the city of Berlin after receiving a mandate from Germany's ambassador in Washington, D.C., "to commemorate the fall of the wall in some fitting manner," he said.

Working out the kinks

The commemoration plans have run into a hitch or two, however.

One is time. The 20th anniversary of the wall's demise – which was televised around the world – is Nov. 9, about 10 weeks away. But the wall at this stage is lying on its side in a Hamilton warehouse, with no foundation, no installation design plan and no decision by the city on where to put it.

Cincinnati Mayor Mark Mallory, who has the final say about where the wall goes, was briefed on the options on Aug. 24. No decision has been made, said Mallory's spokesman Jason Barron.

A second hitch is money. Bob Stevie, executive director of Cincinnati's **Sister City Coalition** who is overseeing site selection, said it will cost an estimated \$80,000 to design and complete a permanent installation including a foundation and lighting. That will transform a nondescript "piece of cement" into a worthy monument to the ideals it now represents, he said.

Unfortunately, that kind of public money is in short supply these days, especially with the city instituting layoffs to close a gaping budget deficit. Efforts are under way to raise the necessary funds, but Stevie said there is no way to complete the project in time for a 20th anniversary commemoration.

"We've got to find one or more sponsors to make this a reality. The city doesn't have any money," Stevie said. "I can assure you that it will not be placed by Nov. 9."

He's shooting for next spring.

Getting the segment to Cincinnati turned out to be relatively easy – and inexpensive – thanks to **ThyssenKrupp Bilstein of America**, a German-owned manufacturer of shock absorbers based in Hamilton. Schade was attending a **European-American Chamber of Commerce** networking event at Bilstein, where he met the company's president, Fabian Schmahl. The city of Berlin had told Schade that Cincinnati could have a piece of the wall, but it had to get it here. Schade talked with Schmahl, and Schmahl talked with his logistics manager.

"Can we get a section of the wall into our containers?" Schmahl wanted to know. Yes, they could.

Bilstein regularly ships 40-foot containers of shock absorber components from Germany to Cincinnati, usually twice a week. The wall section is quite heavy – about 5,000 pounds – but its size was not a problem, Schmahl said. Since Bilstein's shipments don't use up a container's maximum weight limit, they loaded the wall into a container and then stacked their components on top. Bilstein's logistics manager arranged for rigging companies on both ends to donate their services, also. The containers' contents are usually unloaded on the East Coast and trucked to Hamilton, but in this case they shipped the entire container here. The wall arrived about a month ago. It's been in Bilstein's warehouse since, a slab of concrete awaiting its fitting transformation into a freedom monument.

"The thing needs some work. ... It's not ready for prime time," Stevie said.

'Difficult to put into words'

Whatever and whenever the outcome, Anne Cappel, executive director of the Cincinnati chapter of the European American chamber, is thrilled. It's an example of how the chamber helps to connect its European members to Cincinnati, she said.



File Photo

A Cincinnati man owns a section of the Berlin Wall (not area shown).

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"It's not just hiring people here and investing here, but playing a supporting role in the community," Cappel said.

Schade, an American of German descent, was in Germany and flew to Berlin as the wall was coming down 20 years ago. He wept at the Brandenburg Gate, he said.

Schmahl at the time was a 20-year-old college student in a town near the East-West border and had been active in reunification efforts. He's been in the United States for nine years and hopes Cincinnati's monument helps people here understand what the wall and its destruction represent.

"It was overwhelming. It's still overwhelming for me today just thinking of it," he said. "It's difficult for me to put into words because it's very emotional."

Wall held back East from West

The Berlin Wall was erected beginning in 1961 as a way to keep people in Soviet-occupied East Berlin from leaving for West Berlin. It eventually became a 100-mile concrete and barb-wire barrier surrounding West Berlin.

West Berlin consisted of the parts of the German capital that had been placed under U.S., British and French control following its capture by Soviet troops at the end of World War II.

The wall was taken down beginning in November 1989 after the communist East German government capitulated to popular demand to open its borders. The move was forced upon it by the Hungarian government, which opened its border to Austria in August 1989.

East and West Germany were officially united in October 1990.

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