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Moving K-4 steam engine still the goal

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Locomotion is still in the works for the Railroaders Memorial Museum's historic K-4 steam engine, despite recent reports to the contrary, according to the museum's executive director.

Larry Salone said that it's true the museum board recently approved a plan that calls for the K-4 to be assembled for display at the museum in Altoona. But it's not true he's given up on making the locomotive run after about \$1.6 million and 13 years of promises, problems, restarts, fitful progress and frustration.

Salone doesn't intend to settle for making the K-4 a static display, or even a static display with fire in the firebox and enough steam to blow the whistle, as board member Rudy Husband suggested last week.

Instead, Salone will present a plan to the board this week that calls for the famous locomotive to be running by early next year - not necessarily fast or on the open tracks pulling excursions - but under its own steam, at least.

"If that's the case, I think that's fantastic," said Dick Charlesworth, a former board member who was dismayed about last week's news.

"Blame it on me," Salone said of the misunderstanding.

"We all want the K-4 to come back and operate," Husband said Monday. "If he has a plan to do that, I'm sure it will be welcome."

Salone has been working on the K-4 problem since he took over the museum in fall 2007, he said.

A prerequisite will be completion of the long-delayed quarter-roundhouse in the yard to house the reassembly and to shelter the locomotive after it's put back together, he said. Other prerequisites include hiring a steam locomotive expert to finish and test the boiler at his shop and to supervise the reassembly in Altoona.

The museum should have enough money.

The museum will cover the cost of the quarter roundhouse with a \$2.1 million Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program grant obtained a year ago by state Rep. Rick Geist, R-Altoona, after a long battle.

Article Photos



Railroaders Memorial Museum Executive Director Larry Salone (left) and Operations and Facility Manager Neil Myers look at the K-4 drivers Monday at the museum. (Mirror photo by Patrick Waksmunski)

It will comply with a 50-50 match by using about \$2 million in match-eligible money it had previously spent above and beyond the required match for an earlier \$1.6 million RACP grant. That comprised \$1.4 million for museum yard work and \$590,000 for the K-4.

The museum will pay for the additional work with \$300,000 in unspent K-4 money, matched with museum income and donations already in hand and donation commitments.

The grant money must go for labor in Altoona and getting the locomotive running again, Salone said.

Most of the K-4 is in pieces in eight trailers in Altoona. The boiler, frame and tender remain in Steamtown, where it has been since the start of the project in 1996.

The museum hopes to begin the roundhouse construction in two or three months and complete it by early fall, Salone said.

Then it can get to work reassembling the K-4, which museum-goers can witness. The K-4 will start out chugging in the yard, going back and forth, to show it can go, he said.

"We don't want to have a debacle again," Salone said, referring to the 1988 breakdown that ended the last run of the K-4.

If the yard runs are successful, the museum can negotiate with track owners like the Everett or the Nittany & Bald Eagle railroads for permission to run an excursion, Salone said.

Norfolk Southern may be out, because it has a policy of not allowing steam locomotives run under their own power on its mainline tracks, Husband said.

There are also insurance issues, Salone said.

After it's running, experts can help the museum evaluate what additional improvements it would need to bring the K-4 up to Class I railroad standards, so it could travel fast, like it used to in its heyday, Salone said.

A static display isn't good enough, especially for younger people who never saw a steam engine run, Charlesworth said.

"When you see that thing operating - steam and smoke coming out of it, and you see it moving down the tracks," he said. "It's self-explanatory."

People were upset about last week's announcement, but it had a positive side, Salone said.

"It shows you there's still a lot of love and passion," he said.

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