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Official: Working K-4 plans derailed

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After 13 years of grand plans that never got traction and about \$1.7 million in government funding, the Railroaders Memorial Museum has dampened down its ambition for the historic K-4 locomotive.

Instead of rebuilding the 93-year-old engine to current specifications to lead excursions from Altoona, the museum will settle for reassembly to create a semi-static display, board member Rudy Husband said Tuesday.

The K-4 was a topic of discussion at every board meeting, and it eventually became obvious to board members that after "an awful lot of time and energy," it was no longer practical to believe the big machine would ever pull a load again, Husband said.

The Federal Railroad Administration would have required workers to build the boiler to specifications that the machine would not have met when it rolled off the line in Altoona in 1917, said Husband, a spokesman for Norfolk Southern Railway.

Also, Norfolk Southern wasn't planning to allow steam engines to operate on its mainline anyway, because the line is so busy and likely to get even busier, he said.

Nevertheless, the museum still hopes to use the locomotive to "give visitors a steam experience," reconstructing it so workers can build a fire in the boiler, create pressure and blow the whistle - provided the museum can do it in compliance with FRA regulations, he said.

He didn't know how those regulations may differ from regulations governing locomotives pulling a load, he said.

"If it's true, I'm going to be disappointed," said Dick Charlesworth, former board member, of the ratcheting down of expectations. "We were going on all along with the idea that this thing is going to run again."

The museum first needs to finish construction of a quarter-roundhouse in the yard, to provide a place to reassemble and house the K-4, which is in pieces in Scranton and Altoona, Husband said.

The museum built a small pie-shaped section of the quarter-roundhouse several years ago, then added an external turntable in 2006 and had a contract to finish the building in 2007.

But that contract lapsed, because of a funding issue that has since been resolved.

There have been "lots of twists and turns" on the quarter-roundhouse project, Husband acknowledged.

The museum hopes to finish the quarter-roundhouse design soon, then award a contract and complete construction by the end of the year, Husband said. Then it will bring the boiler, tender and some other large pieces back from Scranton and assemble a team that includes professionals and volunteers to reassemble the locomotive.

He's not sure of the cost or how long it would take.

The recent decision to scale back the museum's ambitions for the K-4 doesn't preclude enlarging those ambitions to their original scope at some time in the future, Husband said.

PennDOT has overseen the spending of \$1.6 million in federal taxpayer money for the K-4 and yard projects, with \$1.2 million going for the K-4 and \$400,000 for the turntable, a PennDOT official said in late 2006. An additional \$500,000 was spent on the K-4.

The governor's office has overseen the spending of \$1.6 million in taxpayer money, mainly for yardwork, including track.

An additional \$2 million of federal money was used for additional yardwork. In 2009, the museum received an additional \$2 million for yardwork and to incorporate a new Penn State Altoona railroad engineering program.

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