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Panhandle line not for sale Commission votes 8-0

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NEWARK -- After nearly two years of deliberations on whether it should sell the Panhandle Rail Line, the Ohio Rail Development Commission decided not to -- at least for now.

The commission voted 8-0 to postpone indefinitely a decision on selling the state-owned line. The commission's staff had supported selling the line directly to the Columbus & Ohio River Railroad, which has operated it under a lease agreement since 1992, when the state bought the line to prevent its abandonment.

The decision means the state will retain ownership of the 161-mile line that runs from Columbus through Licking County to Mingo Junction, an important tool to economic growth, according to local leaders.

Some commissioners said concerns about the rail industry's ability over the last several decades to invest the money necessary to maintain lines persuaded them that now is not the time for the state to rid itself of the line.

"I think we have to be very careful going forward with what we do and how we do it," said commission member Thomas McOwen.

The decision came as welcome news to local officials, who have opposed the sale on the grounds that it would lead to higher shipping prices and hurt business development, as well as jeopardize potential passenger rail service in the region.

Rick Platt, executive director of the Heath-Newark-Licking County Port Authority, said while he would prefer the commission rule out a sale more definitively, its decision satisfies him.

"It's not the perfect solution for us, but I think it was the best we could get," he said. "It preserves the status quo, which is what we asked for."

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The commission staff had proposed selling the Panhandle to C&OR for \$10 million. Under the plan, the state would have sold the track, but retained ownership of the right-of-way on which the track runs.

But because of a "lack of comfort level of what action to take," commission chairman James Betts called on the commission to indefinitely postpone a decision.

"When I say indefinitely, that could mean 100 days, that could mean 100 years. That does not predetermine when or if it would be reconsidered," Betts said.

State Sen. Jay Hottinger, R-Newark, said while he is pleased the line will remain state-owned, he believes the commission will again move toward selling the line after Gov. Bob Taft leaves office.

"That's very good news for Licking County on a lot of fronts," Hottinger said of the commission's decision. "However, I would caution that it is something I think it's likely will surface again during another administration."




William Strawn, president of the Ohio Central Railroad System, which owns C&OR, said the company wants to purchase the line because ownership makes it easier to finance infrastructure improvements, but understands the state's reluctance to sell.

"I can appreciate why the commission took the action they took," he said. "We will continue to serve as we have since 1992."

When asked whether the company will continue to seek to purchase the line from the state, Strawn said "We will continue to pursue our business interests system-wide."

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