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ODOT to Sell 'Sooner Sub' Rail Line

Hope for a passenger rail service connecting Tulsa and Oklahoma City may be fading.

The Oklahoma Department of Transportation (ODOT) is planning to sell the Sooner Sub rail line, a 97.5-mile corridor from Oklahoma City to Sapulpa. The Sooner Sub line is currently owned by the State of Oklahoma.

The sale is against the recommendations of the Tulsa Rail Advisory Committee, which comprises all nine Tulsa City Councilors and nine appointees.

The Tulsa Rail Advisory Committee's purpose is to promote passenger rail service between Oklahoma's two largest cities as quickly as possible. The committee said in a November 2012 report that Oklahoma should "commit to maintain ownership of state-owned track" as it is the best possibility for passenger rail service.

The proposed sale of the line is outlined in a letter from Secretary of Transportation/ODOT Director Gary Ridley to Rick Webb, President of the WATCO transportation company. The line is currently under lease to the WATCO-owned South Kansas & Oklahoma Railroad.

"We believe that the time has come when this line can best benefit the State as part of a private rail network and, as such, we propose to sell this line to an operating railroad company," Ridley said in the January 2013 letter.

The letter also said "the Department (ODOT) will require a business plan to include accommodating passenger rail" as part of a bid to purchase the line.

However, Chairman of the Tulsa Rail Advisory Committee Rick Westcott said that if ODOT sells the rail line they cannot force the buyer to allow passenger rail service.

"ODOT's sale of the state-owned rail line is short-sighted, deprives the state of a positive economic return of half a million dollars per year and will be the death knell for passenger rail service to Tulsa and all of Northeast Oklahoma," Westcott said.

The Eastern Flyer Passenger Rail Development Task Force, a group created by the state legislature to study and develop a plan for passenger rail between the two cities, also said improving the Sooner Sub line "appears to be the most economical and potentially sustainable approach" to passenger rail service between Tulsa and Oklahoma City

According to the task force's December 2012 report, installation of a new rail line would cost over a billion dollars. But the state-owned Sooner Sub line "would only require repairs and upgrades to permit efficient passenger service." The report estimates costs for these repairs and upgrades at \$223.5 million.

The development of the Sooner Sub line could do more than give people a new way to get around Oklahoma. The report said the line "can help connect national industries to the state and can be a conduit for the generation of new state revenue."

The line already generates money for Oklahoma.



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“It is currently leased to freight carrier, WATCO, who pays the state of Oklahoma \$500,000 per year,” Westcott said.

But in the January 2013 letter, Ridley said the state’s purpose in buying the line in the first place was to preserve it for future sale to benefit Oklahoma.

“It was our intention to ‘save’ these rights of way, rail corridors and tracks, to select operators and companies to revitalize and improve the properties and then, where and when possible, return these properties back to private ownership for their continued investments and operations,” Ridley said.

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