

WV Eyes Aid To Possible Smelter Restart

Lawrence Messina, Associated Press

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) — West Virginia may offer a tax break worth up to \$20 million annually to help Century Aluminum restart its Jackson County smelter, but officials say any such aid depends on retirees resolving an impasse over their revoked health benefits with a Thursday vote.

Lawmakers, aides to Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin, company officials and other interested parties are discussing a tax break proposal similar to legislation introduced in 2010. That unsuccessful bill aimed to offset the Ravenswood plant's electricity costs. The credits would benefit the utility in exchange for it setting special, reduced rates for the plant that would be triggered by weak aluminum prices.

The Jackson County plant laid off around 650 workers when the California-based company idled the facility in 2009. But Century's subsequent decision to end health benefits for retirees has become a major obstacle for securing public aid for any restart.

Late last month, the company announced that it had reached an agreement over the dropped benefits. The retirees will meet Thursday evening to hear details from the proposal and vote on it, said Karen Gorrell. She declined to comment on the proposal in advance of the meeting.

The 62-year-old's husband is among those who lost his benefits, after more than 33 years with the company, and Gorrell has since become a vocal advocate for the retirees.

"We want to see the plant restarted," Gorrell said Wednesday. "We just didn't want the restart on (the retirees') backs. These men paid for these benefits. They weren't some kind of gift."

If a majority of those who attend the Ravenswood meeting accept the agreement, Tomblin is expected to call the Legislature into a brief, one-item special session for the tax proposal. Lawmakers are meeting in extended session week to pass a new state budget. The House and Senate expect to vote Friday on the proposed \$11.6 billion spending plan.

The company has also said that a competitive labor agreement and aluminum prices are among the remaining hurdles for a potential restart of the Jackson County plant.

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