

WV Gov OKs Tax Aid To Reopen Aluminum Plant

Lawrence Messina, Associated Press

RAVENSWOOD, W.Va. (AP) — Hoping to restore hundreds of manufacturing jobs, Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin signed tax legislation Monday meant to help Century Aluminum reopen its Jackson County plant.

But several hurdles await as the California-based metal producer considers restarting the Ravenswood smelter that it idled in 2009, throwing more than 650 people out of work.

Tomblin noted that when he marked the special session measure's approval, during a brief ceremony in a cavernous warehouse at the sprawling facility along the Ohio River.

"It's taken, basically, everyone in this room, and many others, to get us where we are today," Tomblin said. He added, "We all know how important this plant is to the community of Ravenswood and the people of Jackson County."

The measure aims to aid Century as it negotiates a long-term electricity contract with Appalachian Power. It will provide up to \$20 million in tax credits annually for 10 years, to help the utility provide power to the Ravenswood plant at special rates when aluminum prices are weak. The state Public Service Commission, which regulates utilities, must review and approve any special contract reached for the Century plant.

The company will need breaks from electricity costs totaling \$50 million to \$60 million during the initial years for any restart to make economic sense, said Tim McNabb, the plant's human resources manager

"We've got to come to an agreement that allows us an even more competitive edge in the marketplace," McNabb said.

The company also must reach a new contract with the United Steelworkers union. With a planning meeting for future talks set for Tuesday, both sides expressed optimism regarding that hurdle.

"Comparing it to a football game, we're at half time," Randy Moore, a District 8 union official. "This is a great day. It's been a good first half. We're looking forward to a good second half."

While some advocates hoped that the plant might reopen by August, both Moore and McNabb consider that overly optimistic.

"It's our hope that we start the process sometime this summer," McNabb said. "But you have to remember that there's three to four months of refurbishing the plant, to

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get it to a point where we can start to make metal."

Several dozen Century retirees also attended Monday's ceremony. For some, their fathers helped build the plant in the 1950s.

"A lot of the people in this area have had to leave since this plant closed," said Mack McDaniel, 66, who retired after 34 years. "This will give them a chance to come home, maybe... Hopefully, getting the plant to run again will help (Century's) bottom line, too."

McDaniel and fellow retiree Sonny Hinzman, a 41-year veteran of the plant, also touted the potential ripple effect on the area's economy.

"It will help a lot of vendors outside this plant," said Hinzman, 66, who cited nearby businesses ranging from trucking outfits and parts suppliers to restaurants and retail stores.

Tomblin proposed the tax measure, and the Legislature passed it during a March special session. But those actions hinged on Century offering to restore at least some of the health benefits that it began eliminating in 2010. Retirees accepted the company's deal March 15, clearing the way for the special session.

"If it hadn't been for that, we wouldn't have gotten nothing," said Roy Dailey, 76, who worked at the plant for 20 years.

The retirees and their families lobbied lawmakers, spoke out at Century stockholder meetings and held prayer vigils and protests, among other actions, to fight for the return of those benefits. Before signing the bill, Tomblin singled out Karen Gorrell, the wife of a retiree, for helping to lead the campaign to regain the health coverage.

Delegate Mitch Carmichael, R-Jackson, attended the ceremony and was among the lawmakers who championed the retirees' cause and urged support for the special session legislation.

"It's just such a great thing to see, how many families will be positively impacted by these jobs," said Carmichael, whose father worked at the plant. "It just warms your heart."

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