

Gov. Mike DeWine: Fate of Amtrak expansion will likely be in hands of Ohio's next governor

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COLUMBUS, Ohio—Gov. Mike DeWine and his administration have taken some initial steps toward expanding Amtrak service in Ohio for the first time in decades.

But DeWine says the final decision about whether to authorize new passenger rail routes in the state will likely be up to his successor, not him.

DeWine, a Republican who's term-limited in 2026, said during a Columbus Metropolitan Club event on Wednesday that while his administration successfully sought federal money to study the feasibility of Amtrak expansion in Ohio, it's "very unlikely" that he will still be in office by the time a final decision is made.

"Some future governor, in all likelihood, and a future legislature can make a decision about whether rail transportation, passenger transportation, makes sense for the state of Ohio," DeWine said.

Officials have been conducting initial studies into three new proposed Amtrak routes in Ohio, including lines that would connect:

- Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton and Cincinnati
- Cleveland and Detroit via Toledo
- Chicago and Pittsburgh, with stops in Columbus and eight other Ohio cities.

A fourth study has been looking at having trains on an existing New York City-Chicago Amtrak route stop in Cincinnati daily, rather than three days per week. That route, called the Cardinal, doesn't make any other Ohio stops.

The next phase, which could start soon, would delve deeper into the logistics, cost, and anticipated ridership of the expanded Amtrak routes. That second-phase study, which would likely take about two years to complete, is expected to be paid for by the state's Ohio Rail Development Commission (in the case of the two Cleveland-related routes) and the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission. That's according to

Stu Nicholson, a Columbus rail advocate who serves on the board of the Rail Passengers Association, a national passenger-rail advocacy group.

The Plain Dealer/cleveland.com has reached out to both of those commissions for comment.

The third and final phase would involve the actual construction of the new Amtrak routes.

At earliest, no new trains would start running in Ohio until September of 2030, the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission's executive director [said last year](#).

If/when that new train service starts, Amtrak would cover the first five years of operational expenses. After that, the state of Ohio would be responsible for paying any costs for each line if revenue from things like ticket and food sales isn't enough to cover them.

Most state-supported Amtrak routes have usually not been profitable on their own and [require varying amounts of state subsidies](#).

Amtrak [estimated last year](#) that the proposed Cleveland-Columbus-Dayton-Cincinnati would, by 2035, have 385,000 riders per year but run an operating deficit somewhere between \$16 million to \$25 million. Proponents of Amtrak expansion say the goal is to make the routes profitable over time as service improves.

But until that happens, it remains to be seen whether DeWine's successor, as well as future Ohio General Assemblies, would be willing to approve such subsidies, if needed.

Last month, [the Ohio House added language to the state's transportation budget bill](#) that would have provided \$50,000 for Ohio to rejoin the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Compact, under which several Midwestern states work together to promote and coordinate passenger rail development in the region.

However, that measure was erased in the Ohio Senate and [didn't appear in the final budget sent to DeWine](#), who has yet to decide whether to sign the bill or veto it in some form.

The current frontrunner to succeed DeWine, Republican Vivek Ramaswamy of Columbus, didn't give a direct answer [when asked last month by The Plain Dealer/cleveland.com](#) when asked about Amtrak expansion.

Ramaswamy, a biotech entrepreneur and 2024 GOP presidential candidate, said that, as he wouldn't take office as governor until January 2027, "a lot of the questions that are being adjudicated today at the state level are going to be resolved."

But, in general, he said, "My job is going to be to do whatever advances the best interests of Ohio."

Attorney General Dave Yost, Ramaswamy's only major Republican primary opponent so far, said in a statement that he wants to do more research before deciding whether to commit state money to it.

"Amtrak has not historically been a model of efficiency," Yost stated. "I want to do a deep dive on the business case before Ohio invests one penny."

Dr. Amy Acton, a former state health director who's currently the only Democrat in the governor's race, said in a statement that she, too, wants to study the idea of Amtrak expansion -- though she expressed less skepticism than Yost did.

"Modern transportation systems are a key way that Ohio could compete for jobs and people in the 21st century and our state has voluntarily not been competitive for way too long," Acton stated. "As governor, I would lead a team of experts to ensure we have a plan to put Ohio in position to compete with our neighbors so we can move our state forward and improve the lives of Ohioans across the state."