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**February 13, 2012**

## **End of the Line? Maglev Inc. Assets to be Auctioned**

Category: **News** || By [Jason Togyer](#)

*(Editor's Note: See disclaimer at the end of this story. Updated after publication to add more details, links and clarifications.)*

More than 20 years ago, business leaders, scientists and elected officials dreamed that the Mon Valley would one day be the manufacturing center for a high-speed, high-tech transportation system that could be exported worldwide.

With the dismantling of Maglev Inc., that dream seems to be all but dead.

Pittsburgh-based Harry Davis & Co. announced today that the assets of [Maglev Inc.](#) will be sold at a [public auction](#) at 10 a.m. March 6 at the company's research and development facility in the RIDC Industrial Center of McKeesport.

Maglev Inc. filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in July 2011. According to [a story in the Post-Gazette](#), the

company's largest creditor is RIDC; at the time of the bankruptcy, Maglev Inc. owned the development agency \$311,000 in rent and \$43,000 for real estate taxes.

In addition to welders, hoists, saws, air compressors and other heavy equipment, three patents belonging to Maglev Inc. also will be auctioned, along with office equipment and furniture.

"Most items were purchased new in 2007 and, because this was an R&D facility, the hours on the equipment are very low," said Leonard Davis, president of Harry Davis & Co., in a prepared statement. Many of the items would be suitable for companies ranging from "a small maintenance shop (to) a large fabricating facility," he said.

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**Founded in 1990, Maglev Inc. was owned by a consortium** that included transit car manufacturer Bombardier, Carnegie Mellon University, Duquesne Light, the University of Pittsburgh, U.S. Steel and three international unions, along with the former Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel Corp.

The company was created to construct magnetic-levitation trains --- high-speed trains, propelled by electromagnetism, that float on a cushion of air. The McKeesport R&D facility opened in 2003 in a building formerly used by U.S. Steel's National Works and [was hailed](#) as the first step toward a high-tech manufacturing renaissance.

Magnetic-levitation technology -- "maglev" --- theoretically offers advantages over conventional trains that roll on steel rails, including quiet, high-speed operation with essentially no air pollution from the trains themselves.

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**Maglev Inc. backers hoped that** the federal government would award a contract to build a [magnetic-levitation train system](#) between Pittsburgh International Airport, downtown Pittsburgh, Monroeville and Greensburg that would serve both as a demonstration track and as a high-volume people-mover between Pittsburgh's east suburbs and the airport.

A final environmental impact statement for the Pittsburgh-area system was approved in [May 2010](#). (In 2003, construction costs for that system were estimated at \$3.8 billion, or more than \$4.5 billion in current dollars.)

Besides its work on high-speed trains, Maglev Inc. also had some success doing research into [shipbuilding techniques for the U.S. Navy](#), as well as [studying artifacts raised](#) from the 1860s warship *U.S.S. Monitor*.

In testimony before a U.S. House of Representatives subcommittee in 2009, Fred Gurley, the president and CEO of Maglev Inc., predicted technologies developed by the company would "create new opportunities (in) the steel industry, shipbuilding, highway bridge and access-ramp construction and any other large-scale metal fabrication application."

"Building high-speed maglev will be a long-term economic generator for our nation," Gurley testified at a hearing in Pittsburgh. "It offers the ability to create an entirely new industry in Pennsylvania while delivering the most advanced intercity ground transportation system in the world."

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**Unfortunately, funds to actually build** a maglev train system in the United States have never materialized, either

from private investors or government agencies.

In 2009, local officials announced that Maglev Inc. [had been awarded \\$28 million in federal and state grants](#) for completion of several "pre-engineering studies" and to update its financial plans, but [according to the Tribune-Review](#), the federal portion of the money (about \$23 million) was never released --- because the company never received about \$5 million in matching funding from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

In 2010, the McKeesport facility was toured by U.S. Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood, who promised that his department would continue to study the technology. That same year, LaHood rode an operating maglev system in Japan.

Yet while the Department of Transportation [awarded \\$8 billion in federal funding last year](#) for high-speed rail projects, all of the grants went to "conventional" railroads --- wheels on rails --- and not to maglev projects. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, Democrat from Nevada, is [reportedly an opponent](#) of a proposed maglev project in his home state.

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**Elsewhere in the world, maglev's prospects** also remain questionable. Chinese manufacturers continue to experiment with the technology, and in January a company in Hunan province reportedly announced [a new low-cost maglev system](#) that was described as quieter and environmentally friendlier than conventional trains.

But two planned German maglev systems have been cancelled. The German newsmagazine *Der Spiegel* [last year reported](#) that the two German companies that were pursuing the technology --- Siemens and ThyssenKrupp --- have "lost interest."

The Maglev Inc. patents to be auctioned cover a method for a flexible table used to assemble high-precision structures, such as the guideways that would have been used in a proposed magnetic-levitation train system. The patents were awarded in 2001.

*(Editor's Note: The author is an employee of Carnegie Mellon University. Opinions expressed at [www.tubecityonline.com](http://www.tubecityonline.com) are not those of Carnegie Mellon University, its employees or affiliates, and are solely the responsibility of Tube City Community Media Inc. and/or its contributors.)*

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# Feedback on “End of the Line? Maglev Inc. Assets to be Auctioned”

I had always hoped Maglev technology would get a better look. At one time I believe Baltimore to DC and Vegas to Sacramento lobbies were fighting over who would be first to get one. Unfortunately, it doesn't seem the economics add up. The fares that would have to be charged to recoup the investment would not be realistic. Until they could be built much more cost effectively, it would be a boondoggle to build one.

**Paul** - February 14, 2012

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**jsbqlo** ([URL](#)) - May 27, 2013

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