

# **Meeting Minutes - Southern Rail Commission**

March 3, 2017 9:00am-12:00pm

Louisiana State Capital 4th Floor Governors Press Room  
900 North Third Street Baton Rouge, LA 70802.

Attendance: Greg White, Knox Ross, John Spain, Jerry Gehman, Roy Woodruff, Kay Kell, Jerome Wall, Jack Norris, Toby Bennington, Tommy Clark, Larry Watts, Steve Carter, Patrick Sullivan

By Phone: John Robert Smith, Beth Osborne

Commissioners Not in Attendance: Walt Leger (John has proxy), Claire Austin, Shawn Wilson (Tommy has proxy), Ashley Edwards (Knox has proxy), Blake Wilson, Angelia Mance

Others in Attendance: Dan Dealy, Rachel DiResto (CPEX), Lauren Knotts (CPEX), Betsy Nelson (NARP), Dean Goodell (LADOTD), Phil Jones (LADOTD), Jason Orthner (NC), Bruce Ashton (TX), Brian Speight (NC), Mott MacDonald, Natalie Robottom (St. John Parish President), Laverne Oasis (St. John Parish), Jerry Harrison, Boo Thomas (CPEX), Eric Kalivoda (LADOTD), Barbara Freiberg (EBR Council), John Verona, Mark Murphy (Amtrak), Todd Stennis (Amtrak), Pat Gordon (South Central Planning), Carlton Miller, Nigell Astor (Parsons), John Berenowksi (Greyhound)

**Call to Order and Roll Call:** *Chairman Greg White at 9:08am*

**Pledge of Allegiance and Prayer:** Jerry Gehman

**Recognition of Special Guests** – Guests were welcomed by John Spain who thanked the Governor’s office and DOTD Secretary Wilson for arranging the meeting space in the state capitol.

## **REGULAR BUSINESS:**

- I. Approval of the minutes from the December 19, 2016 meeting – Toby Bennington mentioned correction to amount allocated for Anniston FRA grant – changed to \$87,500. With this correction, motion by Jerry Gehman to approve, John Spain seconded, motion passes.
- II. Financial and Administrative Report by Greg White
  - a. At the end of period ending January 31, 2017, the total cash balance is \$650,981
  - b. Toby Bennington made a motion to approve financials, Knox Ross seconded, motion passes.
  - c. Discussion of audit – Greg will send hard copies to each commissioner for review. It was a clean audit with an unqualified opinion; some findings related to timing in recognizing funds – not a concern and these have been corrected.
- III. Communications and Media Update - Lauren Knotts, CPEX Communications Director, presented an overview of recent press, website and social media outreach.
  - a. Press coverage – 26 stories in 23 local and national outlets since December 2016.
  - b. Dan sends quarterly email updates to key stakeholders – mayors, grass roots stakeholders, train tour followers
  - c. Website – has 7000 unique visitors, 10k visits per year, average 600 per month visitors
  - d. News page and home page are most visited pages

- e. SRC's Facebook pages has lots of page interaction, interesting content, organic interest and fun engaging content.
- f. Profile of followers –SRC skews towards male followers in 25 -34 age group.
- g. Lauren showed an example of one high performing post that reached 12,000 followers.
- h. Twitter is part of the differentiated strategy – smaller footprint, 100 followers.
- i. Emails are going directly to staff of elected officials, we have an extensive list of leadership groups from along the Gulf Coast.
- j. There was a suggestion to ask other partners to link to SRC website on other websites.
- k. Steve Carter stated that he is shocked at how far the SRC has come in the last few years with the work of a strong Executive leadership and support of CPEX, T4 America and DSD Services Group.

#### **OLD BUSINESS:**

- I. Report on Executive Committee activities (*White, Ross & Spain*)
  - a. Update on Visit with Senators Wicker and Cochran-Knox Ross was invited by Cochran's office to give an update in DC. Knox met with Ellen Beares in Wickers office, and Mary Martha from Senate Appropriations. Knox was able to report on where we are, next steps, and he received great feedback, with indication that the project is still a high priority for Wicker and Cochran. There is a two year window with supportive leadership in the right spots.
  - b. Update on Gulf Coast Working Group - The FAST Act provided \$1 million to FRA to form the Working Group, and to study and issue a report to Congress to set forth steps for returning Gulf Coast service. FRA is still working on final report. It is expected to be issued in a few weeks. Daily passenger rail service is proposed which connects to the new terminal at NO Airport. The support and partnership with Amtrak has been critical and they continue to work with the FRA and SRC to negotiate numbers with freight RR.
  - c. Update on FRA Station Planning Grants – T4 has reached out to each recipient to request information. The planning grants are in good shape and FRA is anticipated to sign off soon on these, however, the construction grants may take longer. Although we hope funds are not rescinded in upcoming cycle, each commissioner needs to emphasize to their communities to be responsive when info is needed. A conference call is scheduled next week with each recipient of construction grants and it will be important to meet all deadlines.
    - i. St. John Parish President Natalie Robottom reported that her call with T4 is scheduled and the RFP is drafted.
  - d. Update of November FRA Conference and Congressional Meetings -
    - i. The SRC was invited to present and attended a conference which was great exposure on national stage. At that meeting, they were introduced to friends from North Carolina who are joining us today and will make a presentation.

#### **NEW BUSINESS:**

- I. Special Presentation on the Piedmont Corridor by Jason T. Orthner, P.E., Manager of Design and Construction, Rail Division, North Carolina Department of Transportation and *Mr. Brian Speight with Matt MacDonald*.
  - a. This program is a good example of how North Carolina used multiple funding sources for this critical project and has many similarities to BR/NO corridor.

- b. NCDOTD provides \$60 - \$70 m general fund dollars for capital and operations.
- c.
- d. The presentation gave an overview of the project history, sources of funding, management structure, capital improvements plan, future expansion plans, and key partnerships.
- e. The presentation traced a series of incremental improvements and investments that included closing 40 at grade crossings, double tracks in many areas, passing sidings, curve realignments, bridges rebuilt and investing in new stations (Raleigh).
- f. NCDOTD conducted capacity modeling to confirm number of round trip trains and capacity to improve both freight and passenger trip times over time.
- g. The presentation will be emailed to all commissioners.
- h. Greg thanked Brian and Matt and stated that their presentation gives SRC hope that we can accomplish what we're trying to do. Greg said SRC could look at NCRRT as a model for how SRC or other entity can oversee rail operations and the importance of being transparent to freight operations will be key for us to keep in mind. Accommodating freight traffic increases and enhanced safety for freight, passenger, and vehicle traffic.

- II. John Berenowski from Greyhound presented a proposal to the SRC to fill in the current passenger rail service gaps with bus service.
  - a. This proposal is not to replace rail, but rather provides options for traveling public, with full integration of marketing financials and usage with Amtrak.
  - b. Greyhound would provide upgraded buses with premium seating, less (fewer?) and larger seats, extra management and best drivers, with e-ticketing enabled
  - c. Need thumbs up or thumbs down today for Greyhound to participate and work out terms of service of pooling service and sharing costs with Amtrak.
  - d. Greyhound also recognizes need to improve stations in southeast
  - e. Anything you can do to expand the network adds value especially in serving rural cities along route.
  - f. Phil Jones stated that after Hurricane Katrina, FTA provided funds to run LA Swift between New Orleans and Baton Rouge which grew ridership up to 12,400 riders per month.
  - g. In proposal for gulf coast service – what is frequency per day? That is demand driven, but initially would start with 2 round trips today, with marketing and new attention. There is flexibility to adjust service if demand is not there.
  - h. Knox said we don't want this to be perceived as (not doing) replacing the train, but it is a very intriguing proposal
  - i. John Robert Smith said that jointly branded service makes sense and can build case for need of rail by demonstrating the market.
  - j. The presentation will be emailed to all commissioners.

No action was taken at this time on the proposal, but the consensus seemed to be that we pursue further discussions, and encourage Amtrak and Greyhound to have talks about implementation and coordination along the corridor.

- III. Special Guest, *Mr. Bruce Ashton*, Texas NARP - on how Texas can connect with SRC and an update on passenger rail needs in the state of Texas

- a. Texas NARP needs SRC's help – the resurrection of Gulf coast service will benefit TX by releasing pent up demand for rail.
- b. Texas NARP is very excited about potential service between Meridian and Dallas and he will help promote this in the future
- c. NARP members will also be engaged in advocating for high-speed rail between Houston and Dallas, which is a privately funded/operated service.

**IV.** Governor John Bel Edwards joined the SR meeting and thanked SRC members for their service on the Commission

- a. Governor Edwards was recently in DC meeting with Amtrak Marc Murphy to talk about his support for rail, it will make difference for state.
- b. Governor Edwards will work with other state governors support NOLA to Orlando in moving as fast as possible.
- c. Governor Edwards expressed support for the Inspection train on I-20 to determine feasibility and he will ride it for that occasion.
- d. In 2015 election, all candidates expressed support for rail project between BR and NOLA, which need a regional approach for economic competitiveness of our region, can go to work along river, go to sports games, service to airport, if you don't have to park, it pays for the train ride.
- e. After the current budget challenges are stabilized, he hopes to strategically invest in rail opportunities.
- f. Mark Murphy from Amtrak presented Governor Edwards with a letter from Amtrak CEO Wick Moorman to clearly express the commitment from Amtrak which may be the strongest support letter in print.
- g. Spain thanked Governor Edwards for support as a candidate, for his time during Washington Mardi Gras to attend meeting with Amtrak, and for his leadership.
- h. Governor Edwards stated his commitment to moving forward with revenue package for infrastructure. The gas tax has not been increased in decades and the DOTD backlog is around \$13 billion. Currently, available federal dollars will be left on the table if we don't increase state amount available for match. Furthermore, if Trump puts additional funds on the table, we won't be able to meet our match obligation without additional state revenue.
- i. Although the amount per gallon increase has not determined, it needs to be substantial. Other states such as IN, TN and VA are looking at this. Rail is important part of this revenue package. DOTD has invested in improving rail crossings already.
- j. Governor Edwards said since the I-20 rail project does not require operating subsidy, this project is a no brainer. He will be meeting with Governor Bryant of MS in a couple weeks, and will issue a joint letter to KCS from Governors Bryant and Bentley to get the inspection train going.

**V.** Eric Kalivoda from LA DOTD stated that Louisiana was pleased to host the SRC.

- a. He said the presentations were interesting and relevant, DOTD supports Greyhound's proposal to collaborate with Amtrak since this service could play an important role in communities where there is no commercial air service.

- VI.** Mark Murphy will be in Shreveport next Tuesday to discuss TX grant for capacity study to include Dallas, Ft Worth to Meridian. KCS has agreed to participate which is huge opportunity, gaining momentum.
- VII.** Legislative Affairs Update-John Robert Smith
- a. Administration is proposing 10% increase in defense spending which could impact transportation dollars which could decrease funding for transit.
  - b. A recent Senate Commerce hearing discussed concerns about PPP in rural areas.
- VIII.** The next SRC meeting will be at Wind Creek properties, Montgomery/Wetumpka in Alabama on June 9<sup>th</sup>.
- IX.** **ADJOURNMENT-** Meeting adjourned at 12:04pm.

**SUMMARY AND SCHEDULE OF UPCOMING MEETINGS:**

- June 9, 2017 Alabama
- September 8, 2017 Mississippi
- December 8, 2017 Louisiana