

# **Meeting of the Southern Rail Commission**

June 7, 2019 9:00am-12:00pm  
Baton Rouge Area Foundation  
100 North Street, Suite 900  
Baton Rouge, LA 70802

**Call to Order:** *Chairman John Spain*

## **Roll Call**

**Attendees:** John Spain, Knox Ross, John Clyde Riggs, Toby Bennington, Anita Archie, Stephen McNair, Jerome Wall, Roy Woodruff

**On Phone:** Wiley Blankenship, David Clark, Patrick Sullivan

**Guests:** John Robert Smith, Scott Goldstein, Rayla Bellis, Emily Mangan, Rachel DiResto, Dean Goodell, Maggie Woodruff, Phil Jones, Todd Stennis, Marc Magliari, Carlos McCloud, Joni Emmons, Jennifer Green

## **Pledge of Allegiance and Prayer**

## **Recognition of Special Guests**

## **REGULAR BUSINESS:**

- I. Commissioner Woodruff made a motion to approve the minutes from the last meeting and Commissioner Bennington seconded. The Commission unanimously approved the minutes from the meeting of March 1, 2019.
- II. Update on Jacksonville State University Study - *Toby Bennington*
  - a. With support of Alabama delegation, Jacksonville State University's Center for Economic Development and Business Research will conduct an economic impact study of Gulf Coast passenger rail operation to use as an educational tool to gain support from legislators throughout Alabama. The contract for the study has been signed, and the work will kick off in July. 2 Jennifer Green from JSU joined on the phone to voice her support for the project.
    - i. JSU representative will give an update at the next SRC meeting in September.
- III. Legislative Affairs Update – *John Robert Smith and Scott*
  - a. Latest on the Hill
    - i. Appropriations News
      1. House has introduced bill that speaks to passenger rail. In it Amtrak maintains historic amounts for the national network. The Appropriations Committee has passed the bill, and it is going to the full House for consideration. They are expected to vote on it this month. The Committee report includes a note that Amtrak should restore station and ticket agents that were cut in recent months.
        - a. CRISI is funded at \$350 million; set-asides include \$40 million for commuter rail authorities with accidents, \$55 million for acquiring rights-of-way.

- b. There was a concern that CRISI language prevented SRC from applying for a full project, only for any one track. The SRC worked with Congress to get them to change the language so SRC could apply for full project; that's been part of last few appropriation bills.
    - c. The bill allocates additional money to FRA for salary and expenses (this is FY20 appropriations, but have not awarded FY17 funding).
    - d. House did not put any money into R&E because it has never funded the program; it's always been the Senate.
  - 2. Still waiting for the Senate to release their bill.
    - a. R&E funds would subsidize operating expenses for first three years.
  - 3. The SRC has previously applied for TIGER awards; T4A has been trying to ensure that not just road projects are funded. In this bill, the Appropriations Committee has expanded project types and the way they measure urban and rural project benefits.
- ii. Reauthorization Process
  - 1. The FAST Act expires next year.
  - 2. Senate bill is coming to set highway and road policies for the next five years.
    - a. Soon the Commerce Committee will ask Senators for recommendations. Senator Wicker is the chair.
  - 3. The House does not have a timeline yet for writing and passing a bill.
- b. The Supreme Court recently showed support for Amtrak. On-time performance standard legislation has been bouncing back and forth across courts for more than ten years, but now Amtrak and the FRA can move forward with setting standards.

**IV. Financial and Administrative Report – *Knox Ross and John Spain***

- a. Financial statement as of April 30, 2019: Cash position is \$151,000. \$100,000 was transferred from future project funds to meet current expenses. Extensive work in DC and several required grant matches have been contributing to high current expenses. The commission has begun disbursing some earmarked grants for planning work.
  - i. Commissioner Spain asked that any other cities with planned station renderings bring them to the September meeting to share and post on the SRC website.
- b. SRC has submitted invoices to the FRA and fully expects payment, which would put the SRC in a very good financial position moving forward. An additional \$500,000 for Gulf Coast Working Group has been appropriated; part will be used for further study with Amtrak.
  - i. John Robert noted that the \$500,000 appropriation was partly an effort of the late Senator Cochran, with explicit language that it would support efforts of the SRC.
- c. There was a motion to adopt the financial report by Commissioner Bennington, and Commissioner McNair seconded.
- d. In terms of officers, there have been conversations with Commissioner Blankenship about becoming next SRC Chairman. Commissioner Spain's appointment will end after the September meeting; he noted that there is a need to groom the next group of leadership.
- e. All three states will be renewing dues at \$65,000 per state. This won't happen without support and advocacy of the commissioners; Commissioner Archie noted that Alabama is working to get their dues up to \$65,000.

- i. Phil Jones asked about the timeline for state dues payment. Commissioner Spain replied that the SRC normally sends out invoices in June or July for payment in September. He will confirm payment dates.

**V. Communications**

- a. Joni Emmons will be the new SRC contact at CPEX ([jemmons@cpex.org](mailto:jemmons@cpex.org) or 225-389-7191).
- b. CPEX worked with Commissioner Spain on a press conference, press release, and poll summary 1-pager for the BR-NO rail.
- c. CPEX is available to help with publications, website updates, presentations, and other communications needs.

**OLD BUSINESS**

**I. Report on Executive Committee activities – *Spain, Ross, Blankenship***

- a. Noted that the formation of other groups like SRC is gaining traction around the country. They see the effectiveness of hiring professionals for communications, advocacy, policy, etc. People are asking to talk to SRC representatives; a planning graduate student from Portland asked to meet with SRC leadership. John Robert has been working with Amtrak and a Wall Street Journal video production crew getting footage in Meridian.
  - i. Commissioner Spain noted that it's to SRC's benefit to have other groups like it created. A lot of the work SRC has completed was possible because of earmarks. Multiple commissions around the country with caucus in Congress that promotes passenger rail could help generate unique pots of money available only for Commissions.
- b. Amtrak is working on getting an operating agreement with CSX and waiting on DOTD representatives to contribute.
- c. Commissioner Woodruff asked if there was consideration to add Texas to the commission. The response was no, and that formal legislative avenues would have to be taken. The Commission would have to vote on admitting new members, and new members would have to contribute dues and get support from state government. New states would have to be adjacent. SRC has been open to conversations about new members; no one has been prepared to make the required commitment yet.
  - i. Commissioner Archie noted that there is support in Georgia for rail connections to Birmingham. The Georgia Municipal League is very interested in having the state join; but there is not much support at the state level yet.

**II. Gulf Coast Working Group - *Spain***

- a. Amtrak senior leadership told us that service on Gulf Coast could start in 24 months. We are as close as we've ever been on reinstating passenger rail on the Gulf Coast. Amtrak is still having conversations with CSX, and there are still funding issues to resolve, but we're making progress.

**III. Update on Station Planning Grants**

- a. Mississippi is moving forward with grant agreement; they have established which cities are ready now (Bay St. Louis, Biloxi, and Gulfport), and there will be a separate agreement with cities that will be ready later.
- b. Alabama has encountered some hurdles to construction.

- i. Tuscaloosa is interested in a scope change; they determined that their initial project is no longer feasible. They are interested in using funds to improve existing stations instead.
- ii. Anniston has extended additional money and produced renderings on how to treat access to platforms and recreate the grand entrance to their multi-modal center. Neither rendering was acceptable to Norfolk Southern, so the work is still on hold. Local government is trying to initiate next steps.
- iii. John Clyde: September SRC meeting is a great opportunity to bring in influential Alabama political figures.
  - 1. John Robert will set up a call with Alabama Commissioners to figure out who should be at that September meeting.
- c. Louisiana: There are two Baton Rouge stations (downtown and suburban). Suburban station is in health district for evacuation purposes. One in Gonzales (Ascension Parish), one in St. John the Baptist. Louisiana anticipates a shuttle into New Orleans airport.
  - i. Commissioner Spain noted that as we move from planning stage to implementation, we may need to put together a primer on what funding mechanisms are available to communities and what the options are (ex: can HUD dollars be leveraged against CRISI).

#### **IV. STATE REPORTS**

- a. Louisiana - *John Spain*
  - i. John shared a recent poll on a potential Baton Rouge to New Orleans line. It's an election year in LA where many of our House and Senate members will be replaced, and we wanted to educate legislators about passenger rail through data. We organized a press conference to release the poll findings, which were overwhelmingly positive; it was followed up with very positive letters to the editor, etc. Thanks to Shawn Wilson for his support in having conversations with the LA Governor about the BR to NO rail.
  - ii. Stephen Gardner of Amtrak was asked to speak to KCS about using their rail for NO to BR passenger rail. Outcome: KCS doesn't want a passenger train and says that the route is difficult because of the swampy terrain. Conversations about running an inspection train along the route will continue.
  - iii. Phil Jones reported that DOTD has completed a study of existing stations to determine how can they be brought up to federal standards. Dean (DOTD) has written legislation to include rail in projects that can be funded by state money, so when federal government requires that a state agency be a sponsor through rail program, LA will now have vehicle for state to access those funds.
- b. Mississippi – *Knox Ross*
  - i. MS has been working with Amtrak on studying a bus bridge between Memphis and Birmingham. Amtrak runs a bus service to connect their trains, which is only accessible by purchasing a train ticket. Todd has met with mayors of Tupelo, Oxford, and Batesville to connect Birmingham to New Orleans.
- c. Alabama – *Wiley Blankenship*
  - i. We conducted a rail feasibility study from Birmingham to Mobile. Community engagement meetings were held, and now they are working on a response.

- ii. There was a meeting in Anniston with Tommy Battle; there is a lot of interest in Huntsville to Birmingham to Mobile, etc.
  - 1. Can SRC do something at the September meeting to bring all those people together to make a more cohesive project?
- iii. Wiley is arranging the Montgomery meeting (September 6<sup>th</sup>).

**NEW BUSINESS:**

- I. Reports from Amtrak
  - a. The September meeting in Alabama is a great opportunity to respond to the public skepticism passenger rail has faced there.
  - b. Amtrak is working to improve capacity to complete the last leg of trips rather than having passengers picked up an hour or so from drop-off by working on getting facilities in place on both ends and arranging logistics.
- II. CRISI announcement
  - a. The SRC's application for CRISI funding has been awarded at the amount of \$33 million.

**SCHEDULE OF UPCOMING MEETINGS:**

- I. September 6, 2019 Montgomery, Alabama
- II. December 6, 2109 Mississippi

**ADJOURNMENT**