



MEETING MINUTES

Quarterly Meeting of the Southern Rail Commission

Friday, February 23, 2024 in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi

COMMISSIONERS: Knox Ross, Kay Kell, David Clark (via zoom), Dennis Stripling, Ellis Foster, Stephen Worley, Brian Fulton, Frankie Castiglia Jr., John Spain, Adrian Perkins, Toby Bennington (via zoom), Katie Hood (via zoom), Chris Christianson (via zoom)

ATTENDEES: Rachel DiResto, John Robert Smith, Alyssa Panepinto, Todd Stennis, Ray Lang, Marc Magliari, Arun Rao, Wiley Blankenship, Patrick Duffy, Ben Goodner, Wendy McDonald, Tamika Monterville, Dean Goodell, Phil Jones, March Torres, McKenzey Northington, Rachel Knight, Elizabeth Stevens, Nikki Moon, Jimmy Smith (Mayor of Meridian), Craig Hitt

ZOOM: Melissa Battles, Erin Nolan, Bruce Heniken, Christina Anderson, AJ Austin, Bob Johnston, Catherine Reaves, Jake Herman, Joshua Logelin, Leo K., Maggie Oliver, Kelly Giblin, Stephen McNair, Tara Lambeth, Jason Lathbury, Colin Alexander, Dov Block

CALL TO ORDER: *Chairman Knox Ross*

ROLL CALL

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE AND PRAYER

RECOGNITION OF SPECIAL GUESTS

REGULAR BUSINESS:

- I. Approval of the minutes from the meeting of Dec. 1, 2023
 - a. Commissioner Castiglia moved to approve the minutes, and Commissioner Fulton seconded the motion – motion passes.
- II. Financial and administrative report – Commissioner Ross
 - a. SRC received reimbursement from the Hystor team involved in the hydrogen project for travel to DC.
 - b. Commissioner Fulton moved to approve the financial reports, and Commissioner Castiglia seconded the motion – motion passes.
- III. Communications and media update – Rachel DiResto
 - a. The SRC maintains a strong presence on social media and continues to generate news headlines about various projects.
 - i. Followers: 1,496
 - ii. Reach: 2,030
 - iii. Impressions: 1,865
 - iv. Engagements: 227
- IV. Legislative affairs update - *John Robert Smith*
 - a. John Robert introduced his colleague Mehr Mukhtar who focuses on policy issues in DC for Transportation for America.
 - b. FY24 T-HUD Appropriations: House Bill
 - i. Speaker Mike Johnson and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer reached a deal on topline spending numbers for FY24
 - ii. A laddered Continuing Resolution (CR) was passed by Congress and the White House, which extends funding for some programs and agencies through 3/1/2024 and others through 3/8/2024. T-HUD is in the batch that has only received appropriations through January 19th.

- iii. A forced sequestration of 5% will be applied to all non-defense programs if a continuing resolution is in place beyond 4/30.
- c. FY24 T-HUD Appropriations: Senate Bill
 - i. Senate Appropriations Chair Patty Murray and House Appropriations Chair Kay Granger reached a consensus on topline numbers for 12 spending bills.
 - ii. These will likely be passed in a series of minibuss packages leading up to the March deadlines.
- d. Grant Updates: Expected Awards
 - i. FY22-23 Interstate Rail Compacts
 - ii. April-May 2024: FY22-23 Restoration and Enhancement (R&E)
- e. Expected NOFOs
 - i. FY24 CRISI
 - ii. FY24 R&E
 - iii. FY24 Railroad Crossing Elimination Program
 - iv. FY24 Reconnecting Communities Pilot
- f. Safe Streets and Roads for All
 - i. The NOFO for the SS4A grant was released on 2/21/2024. The purpose of the grant is to support projects that improve safety on roads and streets. Eligible project types include:
 - 1. Developing comprehensive safety Action Plans
 - 2. Safety planning to enhance an Action Plan
 - ii. Implement projects and strategies that address roadway safety problems.
 - iii. This NOFO has multiple application deadlines depending on the grant type, with the earliest deadline being 4/4/2024.
- g. Reconnecting Communities Pilot
 - i. A NOFO for the Reconnecting Communities Pilot grant is expected next week. The purpose of the grant is to improve community connectivity through removing, retrofitting, or mitigating transportation facilities that create barriers for access and mobility.
 - ii. There is a need to improve community connectivity and mobility, particularly for those with mobility challenges, and cities and counties are encouraged to apply for the Reconnecting Communities pilot grant.
 - iii. Eligible project types may include:
 - 1. Building and improving Complete Streets
 - 2. Community/public engagement
 - 3. Developing local anti-displacement policies and community benefit agreements
- h. Gulf Coast Rail Update

NEW BUSINESS:

- I. FRA Update – *Tomika Monterville, Chief, Regional Outreach & Project Delivery, FRA*
 - a. Ms. Monterville discussed the importance of expanding rail service and leveraging safety improvements in small towns across the U.S. She emphasized the need for collaboration and patience, highlighting the impact of additional programs from USDOT such as the railway crossing and elimination program.
 - b. She also shared her personal connection to the communities through her partnership with Mayor Lake in Alabama and her commitment to supporting the Gulf Coast. She mentioned the reorganization of FRA to facilitate more outreach and dialogue, and stressed the importance of having key decision makers involved in their projects.
 - c. She also reported on a successful meeting in Marshall, Texas, and mentioned upcoming high-level meetings in Louisiana.
 - d. She highlighted the ongoing work on the I-20 project and potential future collaborations with Texas, as well as challenges and positive engagement with Amtrak in Alabama. Finally, she discussed the CIDP grant they were awarded for two different routes, with plans to start the route in October 2024.

- e. Additionally, she highlighted the importance of storytelling when applying for grants and the significance of strategic planning. Finally, she shared her personal experience of a tragic incident in Illinois, underscoring the need for specific training for emergency responders in handling passenger rail accidents.
- II. **Report on Executive Committee activities – Commissioners Ross, Spain, Bennington**
 - a. Commissioner Ross discussed the development of a long-distance extension or expansion of a corridor from Meridian to Dallas/Fort Worth, including the financial implications of developing long-distance trains and addressing infrastructure issues in the Northeast Corridor.
 - b. John Robert Smith highlighted upcoming opportunities for the New Orleans to Mobile service and a Connectivity Investment Grant opportunity in Louisiana, urging organizations to apply due to uncertainty about future funding during a presidential transition. He discussed the potential of utilizing various funds to support ongoing rail efforts and related infrastructure and the significance of transit-oriented development projects.
 - c. Commissioner Spain addressed the transition in Louisiana to a new governor and administration, and the pending appointment of the head of the office of multimodal commerce, and the success of obtaining a corridor id grant.
 - d. Commissioner Spain reported that the Baton Rouge Health District applied for a federal grant for building a station to support using trains for emergency evacuations in the event of a disaster.
 - e. Also Baton Rouge was awarded a \$15 million grant to construct a station near downtown.
 - f. John Robert Smith discussed the strategic transportation connectivity for the military along the Gulf rail corridor and the importance of passenger rail expansion in Alabama.
 - g. Commissioner Bennington discussed the importance of engaging with regional planning commissions and he would like to update the economic impact study, with the aim of revisiting the study in Birmingham with key stakeholders.
- III. **Mr. Craig Hitt** provided an overview of the North Rail Connector project at the Port of Pascagoula, emphasizing the need for efficient stewardship of funds and collaboration to secure necessary funding.
- IV. **Mayor Jimmy Smith** from the City of Meridian discussed plans to revive a training facility used to train companies to respond to rail incidents. The facility, one of two in the country, has seen a decrease in activity due to changes in administrations and a perceived saturation of the training market. However, with new possibilities for training due to the I-20 and I-10 corridors, he proposed to update the equipment and technology at the facility and resume training.
 - a. He expressed the need for support letters from local mayors and state emergency management facilities.
- V. Stakeholders in Georgia have expressed interest in joining SRC and the SRC provided them the overview of steps required by statute to join as a member/
- VI. The Westbank Rail Realignment Project in Gretna remains a project that the SRC supports.

SCHEDULE OF UPCOMING MEETINGS IN 2024:

- I. June 7 in Mobile
- II. Sept. 13; Dec. 6 – locations TBD