



Quarterly Meeting Minutes of Southern Rail Commission

Friday, June 6 at 9:00 a.m.

Virtual Meeting

COMMISSIONERS IN ATTENDANCE: Knox Ross, Steven Brom, Mayor Friday Ellis, Brian Fulton, Kay Kell, Rep. Neil Riser, Dennis Stripling, Stephen Worley, Steven Brom, David Clark, Frankie Castiglia Jr., Roy Woodruff

ATTENDEES: John Robert Smith, Arun Rao, Francine Berk, Valeria Coustasse, Rachel DiResto, Ryan Castellon, Ben Dodson, Dean Goodell, Phil Jones, Bruce Heniken, Kevin Lynch, Mehr Mukhtar, Tomika Monterville, Maggie Woodruff, Todd Stennis, Jay McArthur, Scot Naparstek, Joe McHugh, Jay McArthur, Marc Magliari, Jaibin Mathew, Rep. Francis Thompson, Stephen McNair, Doug Rogers, Rick Minor, Scott McKinzie, Nicole Bucich, Leo Kreisel, Jason Lathbury, Jane Covington, Tyler Correa, Derrick Chisholm, Kristin Harris, Brenden Kirby, Jennifer Ansardi, Christina Anderson, Bob Johnston, Elizabeth Lawlor, Kevin Lynch, Ben Bratcher, Tom Piper, Rich Sampson, Garrick Rose, Alan Acumen

REGULAR BUSINESS:

- I. Approval of the minutes from the meeting of March 7, 2024
 - a. Commissioner Rep. Riser moved to approve the minutes, and Commissioner Stripling seconded the motion – motion passes.
- II. Financial and administrative report
 - a. Additional funds may be available to the SRC soon through Cooperative Endeavor Agreements in review by LA DOTD.
 - b. Also, SRC is actively underway with activities funded by the CIPD and IRC grants.
 - c. Commissioner Stripling moved to approve the financial reports, and Commissioner Clark seconded the motion – motion passes.
- III. Communications and media update
 - a. Rachel DiResto reported that the Amtrak Mardi Gras Service is receiving lots of attention from the media.
 - b. Commissioner Ross has participated in a handful of interviews and the SRC is seeing a large volume of articles, with new interest from national media outlets, highlighting Amtrak Mardi Gras Service, and the progress on the I-20 Corridor.
 - c. The SRC maintains a strong presence on social media, gaining followers and consistent engagement across platforms.
- IV. Letter from FRA
 - a. On June 4, SRC received a significant letter from the FRA confirming that SRC can no longer execute construction grant awards as they previously had the authority to do.
 - b. The letter says, in effect, the Louisiana legislature approved the best legislative language granting SRC the authority to sign operating agreements, and each state is encouraged to adopt identical legislation.
 - c. As Mississippi passed language that is not as encompassing, FRA recommends updating the legislation to match Louisiana's language.
 - d. In Alabama, if this authority is granted, the City of Mobile could potentially benefit from grant funding for station build out.
 - e. The SRC thanked the FRA and Tomika Monterville and Kyle Fields for their partnership and ongoing support.
 - f. The FRA has encouraged the SRC to build capacity for administering grants.
 - g. Commissioner Fulton asked about staffing the commission, what kind of staff would we hire?
 - i. SRC would hire staff not just for the gulf coast project, but to work across all priority projects, such as I-20.

- ii. SRC is encouraged to hire a full-time Executive Director who is responsible for overseeing all SRC issues.
 - iii. Could also hire a manager of finance and grant programs. Both the IRC grant and non-federal funds require this capacity to manage.
 - iv. Also need staff to manage oversight service of train service implementation and operations.
 - v. Currently, retired Amtrak executives Jay McArthur, Scot Naparstek and Joe McHugh are contracted to support these functions in the interim – but their contracts are not intended to be permanent.
- V. Legislative affairs update - John Robert Smith, Transportation for America
 - a. On May 30th, the administration submitted its FY26 budget request. Highlights for passenger rail include:
 - i. \$500 million increase for CRISI grants
 - ii. \$2.4 billion for Amtrak to sustain NEC, State-Supported, and Long-Distance services
 - iii. Increase in national network funding but overall decrease in the Amtrak budget.
 - iv. The President's Budget is positive for passenger rail with no calls for cutting long-distance service.
 - v. In fact, the funding allocated for CRISI grants could help the BR-NO project.
 - vi. The new Amtrak Mardi Gras Service was specifically mentioned in the budget as launching this summer which is a positive indicator of federal support for the project.
 - b. Senate panel advances Amtrak and FRA nominations
 - i. David Fink was nominated as FRA Administrator
 - 1. Former President of Pan Am Railways
 - 2. Fink testified that he would prioritize safety and regulatory systems that promote innovation
 - 3. Senators critical of his safety record at nominations hearing
 - ii. Robert Gleason was nominated as a Director on the Amtrak Board.
 - 1. Hails from Johnstown, PA
 - 2. Worked as a public servant in PA under governors from both parties
 - 3. Emphasized the importance of long-distance rail networks in connecting rural areas
 - c. Grant progress and Service Updates
 - i. IRC – Project Management Plan for the IRC has been approved by FRA, and marketing activities are underway to prepare for the launch of Gulf Coast service.
 - ii. CIPD – The I-20 work is robust, and team expects to present work to SRC by end of June.
 - 1. The Project Schedule, Statement of Work, and Budget are being prepared for the I-20 CIDP.
 - 2. Next steps include executing the statement of work and budget and hiring an engineering firm to plan for services including stops, stations, equipment needs, schedules, ridership, and revenue projections.
 - 3. The final step is NEPA PE and completion of infrastructure projects which are needed to start service.
 - iii. The next step of the CIPD work is estimated to cost about \$10 million.
 - iv. The 10% non-federal match will be provided by MS and LA who are expected to contribute \$500k each for a total match of \$1 million.
 - d. Hill Visit by SRC Executive Committee
 - i. The Southern Rail Commission is visiting Washington D.C. from June 23-27 to engage with their Congressional representatives. Offices being targeted include:
 - ii. Senators Wicker, Cassidy, Britt, and Hyde-Smith
 - iii. Representatives Guest, Ezell, Letlow, Moran, Cohen, and Graves
 - iv. U.S. Department of Transportation, Senate Commerce, and the Federal Railroad Administration

NEW BUSINESS:

- I. Amtrak Mardi Gras Service Update – *Ben Dodson, Project Manager, Amtrak Network Development*

- a. Amtrak is working diligently with partners to complete tasks for the Amtrak Mardi Gras Service which remains on track for launch later this summer.
 - b. Availability of tickets and service start date are to be shared soon.
 - c. Amtrak is working with local partners on a community celebration – details will be shared soon.
 - d. Mobile platform underway and CSX is installing the new station track.
 - e. PTC installation is one of the last steps to complete.
 - f. Ben Dodson and Arun Rao have been wonderful partners at Amtrak to work with the SRC.
 - g. Amtrak is also ramping up activities on the CRISI Corridor Improvements which are key for reliability and to make the corridor even better.
- II. Coordination on Marketing Activities for service launch – Rachel DiResto, Emergent Method and Francine Berk, Amtrak Director, Marketing – State Support
- a. Emergent Method and Amtrak are working together to coordinate with local tourism entities in their efforts to promote their service.
 - b. We are developing a marketing toolkit that will provide information about the services and resources that can be used in marketing efforts.
 - c. Amtrak has its own promotional channels in motion such as a landing page with the service information, and as we get closer to the launch of service, more outreach is anticipated.
 - d. Amtrak.com – geotargeted areas are getting notified. Amtrak app users are getting notices that the service is coming soon.
 - e. Amtrak Guest Rewards will be announced soon, and social media will ramp up.
 - f. Posters about the service have been distributed to stations.
- III. Station Ambassador Program
- 1. Joe McHugh is working on behalf of SRC to plan to host a one-day session to train local volunteers on station protocol, service expectations and how to work with Amtrak crews.
 - 2. The program will cover details on ADA compliance and how to speak to operational issues.
 - 3. The goal is to organize local station volunteer programs and provide a welcoming presence at each station.
 - 4. North Carolina and Dallas Texas have good models to emulate. The State of Missouri has station host programs with volunteers who meet the train – they could come talk about how they do it (Kirkwood MI).
 - 5. As the service grows, SRC may want to consider partnering with local high schools to offer community service credits to students who volunteer to be information volunteers at the stations.
- IV. Plan for Inaugural Train Ride – *Knox Ross*
- a. More details will be forthcoming on this celebration event.
 - b. Amtrak is currently working on a rail safety campaign – will work with SRC to post animations on SRC website.
- V. I-20 Corridor Update – *Mayor Friday Ellis, Monroe*
- a. Stakeholders along the I-20 Corridor in Shreveport, Ruston, and Monroe are talking about Build grant and keeping legislators engaged.
 - b. \$10 million is set aside by LA DOTD for advancing this service and matching federal grant funds.
 - c. Rep. Riser is keeping his colleagues and the administration updated on SRC activities.
 - d. Speaker Mike Johnson and Congresswoman Julia Letlow are engaged and SRC will need to continuously update all legislative members across the state on a regular basis.
 - e. Monroe is planning for the Meta \$10B investment. The Atlanta to Dallas corridor will be the next “digital freeway” given all the companies making investments. There will be a need to connect their workforce, and flight travel is already in high demand so multimodal options such as passenger rail is needed.
 - f. In Mississippi, there will soon be 3 new mayors after elections in Vicksburg, Jackson and Meridian. SRC plans to engage them after the elections.
- VI. Other Grant Updates – *Commissioner Ross and John Robert Smith*
- a. FRA is working through GARF for Station grants amendments for work in Bay St. Louis and Birmingham.
 - b. Interstate Rail Compact (IRC) Program update – received FRA approval of the project management plan.

- VII.** Report on Executive Committee activities
 - a. Louisiana
 - i. Updates from DOTD on New Orleans to Baton Rouge project
 - ii. LA DOTD Corridor ID grant – Baton Rouge to New Orleans –
 - a. Dean Goodell stated that LA DOTD completed all information for Step 1 of Corridor ID program.
 - b. FRA personnel changes affect review times.
 - c. LA DOTD anticipates starting step 2 in September.
 - b. Mississippi
 - i. SRC recently met with Commissioner Simmons to get him engaged on commitments on I-20, will be sending him follow-up information.
 - c. Alabama
 - i. Commissioner Toby Bennington will be retiring in October and will leave his role at SRC. His replacement on the Executive Committee will be Commissioner Dennis Stripling who works at the West Alabama Regional Commission, which has been a long-time partner to SRC in Tuscaloosa.
 - ii. Dennis is looking forward to working with elected officials and looking forward to serving the SRC.
- VIII.** The Southern Rail Commission will hold its next quarterly meeting in September and hopefully aboard the train.
- IX.** Commissioner Worley moved to adjourn, and Commissioner Stripling seconded the motion.