



Quarterly Meeting Minutes of Southern Rail Commission

Friday, March 7 at 9:00 a.m.

Via Zoom

COMMISSIONERS IN ATTENDANCE: Knox Ross, John Spain, Toby Bennington, Steven Brom, Mayor Friday Ellis, Brian Fulton, Katie Hood, Kay Kell, Andrew Kilshaw, Adrian Perkins, Rep. Neil Riser, Dennis Stripling, Jerome Wall, Stephen Worley

ATTENDEES: Walter Allen, Christina Anderson, Matt Anderson, Brenda Autry, Francine Berk, Gray Brennan, Rep. Francis Thompson, Valeria Coustasse, Ann B. Daigle, Rachel DiResto, Mallory Donahue, Ben Dodson, Lona Edwards Hankins, Win Ellington, Sharon Gilmore, Matt Gillen, Dean Goodell, Unique Gloryfield, Bob Johnston, Ted Johnson, Phil Jones, Leo Kreisel, Bruce Heniken, Kevin Lynch, Jeffrey Man, Marc Magliari, Lynn Maloney-Mujica, Jay McArthur, Sylvia Martinez, Stephen McNair, Mehr Mukhtar, Tomika Monterville, Maggie Oliver, Alyssa Panepinto, Tom Piper, Ray Morrison, Arun Rao, Mike Reso, Kent Rogers, John Sharp, John Robert Smith, David Smetko, AP Steadham, Robert Stapleton, Jim Sylve, Todd Stennis, Elizabeth Stevens, Peter Waggoner, Maggie Woodruff, John Hollis Tackett, Dena Temple

REGULAR BUSINESS:

- I. Approval of the minutes from the meeting of Dec. 6, 2024 – Commissioner Ross
 - a. Commissioner Bennington moved to approve the minutes, and Commissioner Wall seconded the motion – motion passes.
- II. Financial and administrative report – Commissioner Ross
 - a. Commissioner Ross noted an increase in spending due to preparation for Gulf Coast passenger rail service restoration, and increased spending is expected to continue as efforts ramp up across the scope of SRC projects.
 - b. Commissioner Riser noted his interest in requesting additional funding appropriations from the State of Louisiana to support the SRC's ongoing efforts.
 - c. Commissioner Bennington moved to approve the financial reports, and Commissioner Wall seconded the motion – motion passes.
- III. Communications and media update – Rachel DiResto, Emergent Method
 - a. Commissioners, attendees, media, and the general public are encouraged to subscribe to the SRC newsletter – subscribers receive press releases and statements issued by the SRC, in addition to meeting information – the signup form is available on the commission's website.
 - b. Commissioner Ross is participating in a growing number of interviews regarding Gulf Coast Rail restoration – the SRC is seeing a large volume of articles highlighting service restoration and the commission's role in the effort.
 - c. The SRC maintains a strong presence on social media, gaining followers and consistent engagement across platforms.
- IV. Legislative affairs update – John Robert Smith, Transportation for America
 - a. Smith began the legislative affairs update with a brief introduction of Transportation for America, its mission, and its role as it pertains to the SRC.
 - b. There is a general, widespread uncertainty on Capitol Hill, especially as it relates to federally funded programming and the downstream implications for transportation and infrastructure investments.
 - i. The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) is one of the federal agencies facing the negative repercussions of funding uncertainties – the SRC's grant manager is one of the many federal employees released from their position, which may impact grant timelines.

- c. Legislators and federal agencies are preparing for the anticipated government shutdown; House and Senate Republicans are in negotiations to reach an agreed upon budget, with little to no success.
 - i. If an agreement cannot be found, there will likely be a year-long continuing resolution, allowing the federal government to proceed through the 2025 fiscal year.
- d. The SRC and Transportation for America are actively working with the delegations from member states to position legislation and funding to the benefit of the SRC and service restoration.

NEW BUSINESS:

- I. Mobile to New Orleans service update – Commissioner Ross
 - a. The SRC is participating in weekly marketing meetings with Amtrak to ensure a streamlined launch of Gulf Coast service restoration and successful service.
 - i. Next steps include finalizing food and beverage vendors and ensuring positive media coverage of the restoration effort and the return of passenger rail service.
- II. I-20 Corridor update – Mayor Friday Ellis, City of Monroe, Louisiana Commissioner
 - a. The SRC successfully supported the cities of Baton Rouge and Gonzales, La. in their applications for Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE) grant funding to support station construction.
 - b. The mayors of Monroe, Shreveport, Ruston, and Delhi, La. are following the examples of Baton Rouge and Gonzales to apply for Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development (BUILD) grant funding to support the preparation and development of the I-20 Corridor.
 - i. The BUILD program, previously known as RAISE, provides grants for surface transportation infrastructure projects with significant local or regional impact.
 - ii. The joint application includes letters of support from La.'s congressional delegation.
 - iii. The mayors are actively working to ensure support from all partners and continue to meet with their congressional delegation, along with Amtrak, to discuss potential station locations, their strengths and shortfalls, and their impacts on surrounding communities.
 - 1. The congressional delegation, particularly Representative Julia Letlow (R-La.) and Senator Bill Cassidy (R-La.), actively and regularly seek updates on project status and potential opportunities for federal support.
 - iv. Mayor Ellis noted all identified locations are within their respective city's historic downtowns, making them an asset to community revitalization efforts, especially in communities that have historically faced continued disinvestment.
 - c. Mayor Ellis noted the increasing value of multi-modal infrastructure investment in the I-20 Corridor as the region sees continued large-scale investments from the technology sector.
- III. Amtrak updates – Arun Rao and Ben Dodson, Amtrak
 - a. Amtrak is in the final stretch of service implementation for Gulf Coast service restoration, with over 100 active implementation tasks spread across 13 departments.
 - b. Construction is ramping up at the Mobile, Ala. Station.
 - i. Utility relocation is a critical milestone for station completion – relocations are on schedule and nearing completion.
 - ii. Crews are excavating the parking lot to support the station's platform, and grading is underway.
 - c. There are several critical implementation tasks required for service startup, including the execution of all funding agreements, completion of all start-of-service capital projects, and safety certifications and testing.
 - i. Operating agreements with La. and Miss. are advancing; Amtrak anticipates agreement execution in the short term.
 - ii. Critical path implementation is underway, and Amtrak is on schedule for the projected summer 2025 service start date.

- iii. Amtrak is proactively meeting with stakeholder groups, such as freight drivers and public safety organizations, to conduct rail safety trainings that both meet and exceed federal safety requirements.
 - d. Amtrak continues to support the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development's (LADOTD) Baton Rouge – New Orleans Corridor Identification and Development Program (CIDP) effort through host railroad outreach and technical assistance, including providing past study materials to include in the Gap Analysis task required within CIDP Step 1, a letter of support for the multi-city BUILD application, and participating in Louisiana station site desktop reviews.
- IV. Grant updates – John Robert Smith, Transportation for America
 - a. The I-20 CIDP process is underway, with the Step 1 Gap Analysis submitted to the FRA in March 2025. The analysis is pending FRA review – the review process will be complete within April 2025 at the earliest due to staffing shortages.
 - b. A Grant Adjustment Request Form (GARF) has been submitted to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) for previously allocated station grants.
 - i. Requests include an extension of the grant and the reimbursement or advanced reimbursement for stations in Bay St. Louis, Miss. and Birmingham, Ala.
 - ii. Gulfport and Pascagoula, Miss. have yet to draw station funds due to limitations with the SRC's ability to award construction grants.
 - c. The SRC was previously awarded Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvement (CRISI) grant funding – Amtrak will fulfill this funding and the SRC will not draw this allocation.
 - d. Two previously awarded Restoration and Enhancement (R&E) grants will be transferred to Amtrak – the funding will support the first three years of operational support for the Gulf Coast service. The first three years are part of a six-year operating grant secured by the SRC. Amtrak will be awarded the next portion of the R&E grant on behalf of the SRC.
- V. Report on Executive Committee activities – Commissioners Spain, Ross, and Bennington
 - a. Louisiana – Commissioner Spain
 - i. Further progress on Baton Rouge – New Orleans service has slowed because of recent gubernatorial and presidential administration shifts.
 - ii. The estimated cost of service implementation is \$120 million, accounting for capital projects and required planning efforts. Commissioner Spain noted the state had funding in place at the end of Governor John Bel Edwards' administration – while Governor Landry is not expressly opposed to passenger rail service expansion, his administration prioritizes interstate expansion.
 - iii. Both the SRC and Amtrak are awaiting the state's signoff on operating agreements for Gulf Coast passenger rail – Commissioner Spain noted the anticipated return and success of this route will act as strong evidence of the benefit of passenger rail service for the state.
 - iv. The Landry administration has strong interest in the I-20 corridor due to continued economic investment in the region.
 - v. Dean Goodell, LADOTD Freight and Passenger Rail Director, noted the state is in the process of completing CIDP Step 1 for the I-20 Corridor, with the Gap Analysis, schedule, budget, and scope of work awaiting FRA review.
 - b. Mississippi – Commissioner Ross
 - i. Several states have contacted SRC leadership regarding joining membership, including Fla., Ga., and Texas.
 - 1. In order to join the SRC, their respective state legislatures are required to take legislative action in support of commission membership. If their state legislatures support admission to the SRC, the state legislatures for La., Miss., and Ala., will have to approve admission.
 - 2. Fla. legislators have introduced legislation to join the SRC.
 - 3. The SRC will form a committee to discuss potential expansion and the impacts on commission projects. Commissioner Ross requested approval for the Executive Committee to act as the research committee.

4. Commissioner Spain moved to approve the motion, and Commissioner Stripling seconded the motion – motion passes.
 - ii. Commissioner Ross and SRC Consultant, Jay McArthur will attend the Southeast Rail Forum to present the story of the SRC, the impact of its work, and the value of Interstate Rail Compacts (IRC).
 - iii. Miss. commissioners continue to meet with the state's delegation to ensure continued support.
 - c. Alabama – Commissioner Bennington
 - i. The SRC continues to engage State Sen. Albritton, resulting in a line-item budget request in support of the commission's administrative needs.
- VI.** Motion to adjourn
- a. Commissioner Stripling motioned to adjourn the meeting, and Commissioner Wall seconded the motion – motion passes.

SCHEDULE OF UPCOMING MEETINGS IN 2025:

- I. The Southern Rail Commission will hold its next quarterly meeting on June 6; the location is tentatively set for Bay St. Louis but may be changed to accommodate the expected launch of Gulf Coast passenger rail service.
- II. Tentative dates: June 6, Sept. 5, Dec. 5 – locations TBD.