



SOUTHERN RAIL COMMISSION

Meeting of the Southern Rail Commission

Friday, September 20 at 9:00 a.m.

Via Zoom

COMMISSIONERS IN ATTENDANCE: Knox Ross, John Spain, Toby Bennington, Steven Brom, Dennis Stripling, Stephen Worley, Kay Kell, Katie Hood, Jerome Wall, Brian Fulton, Frankie Castiglia Jr., Roy Woodruff, Chris Christianson, Andrew Kilshaw, Walt Leger

ATTENDEES: John Robert Smith, Alyssa Panepinto, Rachel DiResto, Amanda Nottingham, Ann Daigle, Arun Rao, Ben Bratcher, Ben Dodson, Bob Johnston, Bruce Heniken, Chase Toft, CJ Sartor, Dean Goodell, Derek Chisholm, Doug Rogers, Hayden Lasater, Lori Sokol, Mary Perez, Mehr Mukhtar, Melissa Battles, Michael Jerew, Nicole Bucich, Rachel Haney, Rich Sampson, Rick Minor, Sara Clark, Scot Naparstek, Sharon Gilmore, Stephen McNair, Ted Johnson, Tomika Monterville, Valeria Coustasse, Virgil Payne, Joe McHugh, Maggie Woodruff, Brooks Davis, Erick Wright, Bob Johnston, Kevin Lynch, Patrick Duffy, Garrick Rose, Peter Waggoner, Francine Berk, Rep. Francis Thompson

REGULAR BUSINESS:

- I. Approval of the minutes from the meeting of June 7, 2024 – Commissioner Ross
 - a. Commissioner Bennington moved to approve the minutes, and Commissioner Woodruff seconded the motion – motion passes.
- II. Financial and administrative report – Commissioner Ross
 - a. The SRC is assessing state dues due to low funding; Louisiana has paid its dues in advance and other funding sources are expected to be made available soon.
 - b. Commissioner Bennington moved to approve the financial reports, and Commissioner Spain seconded the motion – motion passes.
- III. Communications and media update – Rachel DiResto, Emergent Method
 - a. The SRC continues to maintain a strong presence on social media, gaining followers and consistent engagement across platforms, in addition to increased earned media attention about various projects.
 - b. Emergent Method has prepared a presentation for Alabama Commissioners on the overview of passenger rail economic impact studies.
- IV. Legislative affairs update – Mehr Mukhtar, Transportation for America
 - a. Speaker of the House Mike Johnson's six-month government funding plan failed on the House floor amongst opposition from House Republicans; the proposed plan would have kept funding static for most federal agencies and included legislation requiring proof of citizenship to vote. A government shutdown on October 1 is unlikely due to the anticipated 3-month stopgap spending bill.
 - b. The House Transportation & Infrastructure committee approved two bills regarding Amtrak transparency on Sept. 18.
 - i. The first, introduced by Rep. Marc Molinaro (R-N.Y.) would mandate public transparency for bonuses that Amtrak pays to executives, including explanations on how bonuses are calculated.
 - ii. The second, introduced by Rep. Troy Nehls (R-Texas) would require Amtrak to publicize Board meetings by publishing agendas, attendance, etc.
 - c. Senator Cantwell (D-Wash.) convened a full committee hearing to consider presidential nominations for the Amtrak Board of Directors on Sept. 11. Nominees include David Capozzi (Md.), Samuel Lathem (Del.), Ronald Battory (N.M.), and Elaine Marie Clegg (Idaho).
 - i. The individuals are representative of a wide range of interests, such as planning and operations, funding and finance, labor issues, and accessibility, in addition to the

- common goals of greater transparency in Amtrak's operations and capitalizing on funding made available through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA).
- ii. The Commerce Committee will meet to approve the nominees, placing their names on the Executive Calendar for Senate confirmation.

NEW BUSINESS:

- I. Report on Executive Committee activities – Commissioners Bennington, Ross, Spain
 - a. The SRC continues to work with local and regional leadership to advance passenger rail in the I-20 corridor, in addition to the Gulf Coast and New Orleans to Baton Rouge service routes.
 - b. Communities are excited for the return and expansion of service, citing the economic impact and tourism potential not only for surrounding and adjacent communities, but for potential passengers across the globe.
 - c. Commissioner Bennington reports continued collaboration with Alabama officials to establish a line item in the state budget to appropriate funds to support passenger rail service.
- II. Amtrak update – Arun Rao, Amtrak
 - a. Amtrak shared recent accomplishments on the Gulf Coast project, including:
 - i. The Mobile City Council's approval of funding and station lease agreements with Amtrak and an intergovernmental agreement with the Port of Mobile
 - ii. Completed NEPA for Mobile Station Project from Amtrak and the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA)
 - iii. CSX's receipt of expanded railroad right-of-way easement for the Mobile Station project
 - iv. Award of a construction contract for the Mobile temporary platform
 - b. Preparation work for the relocation of utilities at the Mobile Station site is underway as Amtrak works to secure building permits and a temporary construction easement with the City of Mobile; construction is anticipated to begin in the fall.
 - c. CSX and Amtrak are coordinating the construction of the Mobile Station's interim platform and station track components, while the SRC and Amtrak are focused on miscellaneous service start-up tasks.
 - d. Amtrak and the FRA are finalizing obligation of the FY22 Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvement (CRISI) grant, in addition to submitting FY 21-24 Restoration and Enhancement (R&E) grant applications to secure additional federal operating support.
 - i. SRC aims to compile letters of support and commitment letters from elected officials, emphasizing the importance of reducing funding burdens on local partners
 - e. The funding agreement for the City of Mobile is complete, and Amtrak is working with LADOTD and MDOT to finalize remaining funding agreements for Gulf Coast Service.
 - f. Amtrak shared updates regarding the New Orleans to Baton Rouge service, including:
 - i. Collaboration with LADOTD to optimize schedules for the route's Service Development Plan
 - ii. Continued support for LADOTD as it participates in the Corridor Identification (CID) process and the upcoming Step 2, Service Development Plan
- III. Grant update – Commissioner Ross and John Robert Smith, Transportation for America
 - a. The Corridor Identification and Development Program (CIDP) funding for the Gulf Coast project will support a project performance plan and the addition of support to develop the route's plan and budget.
 - b. The Federal-State Partnership Program allows for implementation and planning support; no grants were awarded in the last round of federal-state grant programs and no decision has been made on whether grants will be awarded in the next round.
 - c. The Interstate Rail Compact (IRC) grant agreement has been submitted to the FRA and is in legal review. Once accepted, the SRC will have access to \$400,000 in federal funding for capacity expansion to support the establishment and promotion of rail service.
 - d. Dean Goodell, LA DOTD Freight and Passenger Rail Director, shared that Step 1 of the CIDP has been accepted by the FRA, and LADOTD is working to complete the second task, with

the expectation the GAP analysis will be completed soon and LADOTD will move to Step 2 by spring.

- IV. Vote on pre-authorizing funds for specific legal and project support – Commissioner Ross
 - a. As the SRC continues to expand its advocacy and reach, it seeks legal counsel to support legislative affairs and general operations. The two attorneys include:
 - i. Scot Naparstek, who has over 10 years of experience at Amtrak, previously serving as Executive Vice President of Service Development, bringing a unique perspective for navigating service restoration and expansion, safety, and customer service.
 - ii. Joe McHugh, who has over two decades of experience championing passenger rail service on the Hill, with notable service as Vice President of state-supported business development – McHugh is widely praised for his work to instill public confidence and trust in Amtrak among both ridership and Congress, launch of high-speed rail routes, and secure federal funding for long-distance service.
 - b. Commissioner Bennington moved to contract with Joe McHugh as funding becomes available, and Commissioner Kell seconded the motion – motion passes.
 - c. Commissioner Spain moved to contract legal counsel from Scot Naparstek as funding becomes available, and Commissioner Woodruff seconded the motion – motion passes.
- V. Passenger rail advocacy in Florida – John Robert Smith, Transportation for America
 - a. Ann Daigle of Louisiana 4-Corners Coalition for Transportation Planning Reform and the Seaside Institute spoke to the absence of public transit in Florida, noting an interest in service expansion to the Florida panhandle.
 - i. Commissioner Ross noted the continued discussion of establishing bus services from Mobile to Pensacola following the return of Gulf Coast service, with bus ridership serving as an important boost to ridership and evidenced support of rail service in the area.
 - b. Rick Minor of the Leon County Board of Commissioners spoke to the continued interest in passenger rail service amongst elected leadership in the Florida panhandle, sharing a regional interest in advocating to Gov. DeSantis admittance to the SRC.
- VI. State Reports – Commissioner Bennington
 - a. All relevant updates were previously covered in the legislative affairs update, report on Executive Committee activities, Amtrak update, and grant update.
 - b. Commissioner Bennington expressed his gratitude for fellow Alabama commissioners, the Alabama Association of Regional Councils, former Commissioner Stephen McNair, and Gov. Ivey’s administration for their support in rail advancement across the state.
- VII. Motion to adjourn
 - a. Commissioner Stripling motioned to adjourn the meeting, and Commissioner Bennington seconded the motion – motion passes.

SCHEDULE OF UPCOMING MEETINGS IN 2024:

- I. The Southern Rail Commission will hold its next quarterly meeting on December 6; the meeting location has not been determined.