



SOUTHERN RAIL COMMISSION

Meeting of the Southern Rail Commission

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

Via Zoom

COMMISSIONERS IN ATTENDANCE: Knox Ross, John Spain, Toby Bennington, Steven Brom, Frankie Castiglia Jr., Chris Christianson, David Clark, Brian Fulton, Kay Kell, Andrew Kilshaw, Walt Leger, Adrian Perkins, Jerome Wall, Roy Woodruff

ATTENDEES: Alyssa Panepinto, Rachel DiResto, John Robert Smith, Jay McArthur, Arun Rao, AJ Austin, Ben Dodson, Bob Johnston, Brendan Kirby, Bruce Heniken, David Smetko, Francine Berk, Mayor Friday Ellis, Rebekah Gongora, Jan Ham, Joshua Smith, Joshua Logelin, Joe McHugh, Karen Parsons, Kevin Lynch, Leo Kreisel, M. Echols, Nicole Bucich, Randy Noe, Rep. Francis Thompson, Maggie Woodruff, Rich Sampson, Judge Richard Anderson, Rick Minor, Sara Clark, Sylvia Martinez, Ted Johnson, Todd Stennis, Matt Gillen, Yvette Brandt, Zachary Holifield, Kelly Giblin, Valeria Coustasse, Craig Hitt, Elizabeth Lawlor, John Sharp, Marlo Lacen, Stephen McNair, Dean Goodell, Phil Jones, Wendy McDonald, Christine Anderson

REGULAR BUSINESS:

- I. Approval of the minutes from the meeting of Sept. 20, 2024 – Commissioner Ross
 - a. Commissioner Bennington moved to approve the minutes, and Commissioner Spain seconded the motion – motion passes.
- II. Financial and administrative report – Commissioner Ross
 - a. The SRC continues to assess its financial state due to funding; Louisiana has paid their dues in advance for the upcoming fiscal year, Mississippi's dues will be paid in January.
 - b. Commissioner Bennington moved to approve the financial reports, and Commissioner Woodruff seconded the motion – motion passes.
- III. Legislative affairs update – John Robert Smith, Transportation for America
 - a. President-elect Donald Trump announced former Congressman Sean Duffy as the United States Department of Transportation (USDOT) Secretary nominee on Nov. 18, 2024.
 - i. Duffy previously served as District Attorney (2002 – 2010) and represented Wisconsin in Congress from 2011 – 2019.
 - ii. Duffy notably voted to eliminate the Davis-Bacon Act, which requires contractors and subcontractors to pay laborers and mechanics prevailing wages and fringe benefits for their work on federally funded construction projects, and supported legislation to increase truck weight limits, require commercial operator drug testing, and prohibit motorcycle safety checkpoints.
 - iii. His experience includes little to no transportation experience.
 - b. Representative Garret Graves (R-LA) is rumored to be nominated as the next FEMA administrator.
 - i. Graves has represented La.'s ninth district since 2015 and is leaving Congress due to redistricting.
 - ii. He notably served as the chairman of the Louisiana Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority in 2008.
 - iii. The appointment may be advantageous for the Baton Rouge – New Orleans passenger rail service, especially if positioned as critical infrastructure for evacuation efforts in disaster preparation, response, and recovery efforts.
 - c. Senator John Thune (R-SD) will serve as the Senate Majority Leader; Republicans hold a 53-47 majority.
 - i. Senator Thune is viewed as open to supporting passenger rail service despite South Dakota lacking service.
 - ii. Notable committee assignments include:

1. Susan Collins (R-ME) is expected to serve as appropriations chair, with Patty Murray (D-WA) serving as the ranking member.
 2. Mike Crapo (R-ID) is expected to serve as finance chair, with Ron Wyden (D-OR) serving as the ranking member.
 3. Ted Cruz (R-TX) is expected to serve as commerce chair, with Maria Cantwell (D-WA) serving as the ranking member.
 4. Shelley Moore Capito (R-WV) is expected to serve as environment/public works chair, with Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) serving as the ranking member.
 5. Katie Britt (R-AL) will serve on the Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs committee and the Subcommittee on Housing, Transportation, and Community Development.
 6. Cindy Hyde-Smith (R-MS) will serve on the Committee on Appropriations and is expected to chair the Subcommittee on Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies (THUD).
 7. Roger Wicker (R-MS) will serve on the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation and the Subcommittee on Surface Transportation, Maritime, Freight, and Ports; the Committee on Environment and Public Works and the Subcommittee on Transportation and Infrastructure; and is expected to chair the Committee on Armed Services.
 8. John Kennedy (R-LA) will serve on the Committee on Appropriations and THUD.
 9. Bill Cassidy (R-LA) is expected to chair the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions.
- d. Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA) currently leads the smallest majority in the history of the House of Representatives with a 217-215 majority.
- i. Republican control of the House is contingent upon the Fla. special election scheduled for April 11.
 - ii. Speaker Johnson is advocating for a three-month continuing resolution, while some Senate-side Republicans are pushing to pass spending bills prior to the installation of the next Congress, which will allow the party to immediately prioritize President-elect Trump's policy agenda.
 1. Without agreement on the issue, a continuing resolution seems likely.
 - iii. Notable committee assignments include:
 1. Tom Cole (R-OK) is expected to chair the appropriations committee, with Rosa DeLauro (D-CT) serving as the ranking member.
 2. There is a toss-up on who will serve as the transportation and infrastructure chair – current candidates include Sam Graves (R-MO), Rick Crawford (R-AR), and David Rouzer (R-NC); Rick Larsen (D-WA) will serve as ranking member.
- e. The Amtrak Board Nominees awaiting to be confirmed this Congress include Elaine Marie Clegg (D-ID), Ronald Batory (R-NM), Samuel Lathem (D-DE), David Capozzi (D-MD), and Lanhee Chen (R-CA).
- f. The Water Resources Development Act of 2024 allows the transfer of unobligated Transportation Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act (TIFIA) balances to the Surface Transportation Block Grant (STBG) program; up to 50% of STBG funds can be used for projects with the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement Program (CMAQ).
- g. In fact, MS is using CMAQ funds as a match for the R&E grant.
- h. CMAQ funds can be used for:
- i. State supported rail operations
 1. Ex: Baton Rouge – New Orleans passenger rail
 - ii. Bridge construction
 1. Ex: Bonnet Carré Spillway improvements
 - iii. Station construction

- IV. Communications and media update – Rachel DiResto, Emergent Method**
- a.** The SRC continues to gain national attention for its involvement in rail service restoration; notably receiving recent recognition from USDOT and Secretary Pete Buttigieg following the Mobile groundbreaking event.
 - b.** The SRC maintains a strong presence on social media, gaining followers and consistent engagement across platforms.

NEW BUSINESS:

- I. Mobile to New Orleans service update – Commissioner Ross**
- a.** There is significant momentum on this project; the SRC will continue to work with the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) to ensure the project moves forward.
 - b.** Commissioner Ross recognized the continued contributions of Mississippi's mayors, who are critical to service restoration and have been extremely patient throughout the restoration effort.
 - c.** Platform work is imminent in Mobile, marking a significant milestone in the project; platform construction is the final infrastructure project required to begin service.
 - d.** The operating agreements between both Louisiana and Mississippi with Amtrak are also pending final execution.
- II. Amtrak update – Arun Rao and Ben Dodson, Amtrak**
- a.** The Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) grant agreements between the FRA and Amtrak are fully executed; funding is obligated for the Gulf Coast Corridor Identification Program (CIDP), which will support a project performance plan and the addition of support to develop the route's plan and budget.
 - b.** Amtrak and its partners, including the SRC, recently celebrated the groundbreaking of the Mobile platform with special guest US DOT Secretary Pete Buttigieg, and Amtrak and the City of Mobile have fully executed operating funding matches and station lease agreements.
 - c.** The Surface Transportation Board (STB) granted Amtrak a motion to dismiss the Gulf Coast proceeding.
 - d.** Amtrak and FRA are working with other partners to do everything possible to start service as soon as possible.
 - e.** There are several critical implementation tasks required for service startup, including the execution of operating agreements between Amtrak and the states of Louisiana and Mississippi; execution of Mississippi's CRISI agreements; submission and approval of safety documentation requirements by the FRA; and the completion of the Mobile platform.
 - f.** In the near future, Amtrak will finalize the ticket pricing strategy and café car menu; develop sales channels, such as websites, apps, customer service training, and industry alliances; mobilize all require machinery; and conduct stakeholder safety training to support service implementation.
- III. Grant update – John Robert Smith, Transportation for America**
- a.** The Interstate Rail Compact (IRC) grant agreement has been obligated and signed.
 - i.** The original law allows for 10 rail compacts and anticipates an average of three states per compact, with a minimum requirement of two states per compact.
 - ii.** The IRC will allocate \$400,000 in federal funds, matched by \$400,000 in nonfederal funds, for capacity expansion to support the establishment and promotion of rail service.
 - b.** 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; the SRC is awaiting review from the FRA.
 - i.** The SRC has also submitted a CIDP proposal for the I-20 corridor and is awaiting further review.
 - ii.** The State of Louisiana submitted a CIDP proposal for the Baton Rouge to New Orleans project.
- IV. Extension of contract with Transportation for America – Commissioner Ross**

- a. The SRC will extend its existing contract with Transportation for America.
 - b. Commissioner Kell moved to approve the motion, and Commissioner Bennington seconded the motion – motion passes.
- V. Report on Executive Committee activities – Commissioners Ross, Spain, Bennington
 - a. Louisiana – Commissioner Spain
 - i. 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.
 - ii. The State is also working with Amtrak to finalize operating agreements for the New Orleans – Mobile service.
 - b. Mississippi – Commissioner Ross
 - i. Mississippi will use CMAQ funds as the match for their rail operating grant.
 - ii. The State of Mississippi is working with Amtrak to finalize operating agreements for the New Orleans – Mobile service.
 - c. Alabama – Commissioner Bennington
 - i. Alabama officials have met with State Senator Greg Albritton to discuss the state’s financial contributions to service routes and officials remain engaged on the I-20 Corridor in addition to the New Orleans – Mobile route.
 - ii. As stated, construction on the Mobile platform is underway.
- VI. I-20 Corridor update – Mayor Friday Ellis, City of Monroe
 - a. Mayors in North Louisiana continue to engage on the I-20 Corridor project and are actively working with DOTD for station planning efforts and to secure necessary funding.
 - b. Local leadership will work alongside the SRC to conduct stakeholder engagement processes throughout the duration of the CIDP process.
- VII. Motion to adjourn
 - a. Commissioner Clark motioned to adjourn the meeting, and Commissioner Woodruff seconded the motion – motion passes.

SCHEDULE OF UPCOMING MEETINGS IN 2025:

- I. The Southern Rail Commission will hold its next quarterly meeting on February 7¹; the meeting location has not been determined.
- II. Tentative dates: June 6, Sept. 5, Dec. 5 – locations TBD.

¹ The quarterly meeting originally scheduled for February 7 has been postponed; the 2025 Q1 meeting is scheduled to take place on March 7.