

# **Meeting of the Southern Rail Commission**

Friday, Dec. 1, 2023 – 9:00 -11:30 AM  
The Hyatt Centric Hotel, New Orleans, LA

**COMMISSIONERS:** Knox Ross, Kay Kell, Steven Brom, David Clark (via zoom), Dennis Stripling, Ellis Foster, Stephen Worley, Brian Fulton, Frankie Castiglia Jr., Roy Woodruff, Renee Lapeyrolerie, John Spain, Adrian Perkins, Toby Bennington (via zoom). Walt Leger

**ATTENDEES:** Rachel DiResto, John Robert Smith, Alyssa Panepinto, London Weier, Maggie Woodruff, Todd Stennis, Marc Magliari, Arun Rao, Gerald Long (Senator Cassidy), Ben Dodson, Laura Luce, Wiley Blankenship, Rodney Alexander, Tom Hunter, Michael Jerew, Patrick Duffy, Todd Stennis, Arun Rao, Marc Magliari, Collin Alexander, Ben, Whitney McDonald, Brett Rosen, Dan Jartres, Gerald Long, Mayor Tom Arceneaux, Lona Hankins, Peter Waggoner, Rich Sampson, Annalisa Kelly, Jimmy Thomas, Meagan Nguyen, Mayor Belinda Constant, Ben Goodner

**ZOOM:** Mayor Friday Ellis, Tamika Monterville, Bob Johnston, Stephen McNair, Dov Block, Melissa Battles, Jake Herrman, Erin Nolan, Brad Gunther, Bob Johnston, Bruce Heniken, Candace Cooksey, Dr. Ray Morrison, Francis Thompson, Jim Delapp, Janel Carothers, Trent Machner, Sierra Club Georgia Chapter, Matt Anderson, Chris Chandler, Hillman Frazier, Jennifer Green, Amy Ainsworth, Phil Jones, Christina Anderson, Jake Herman

**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 Sept. 8, 2023
  - a. Commissioner Leger moved to approve the minutes, and Commissioner Bennington seconded the motion – motion passes.
- II. Financial and administrative report – Commissioner Ross
  - a. LA has pre-paid their dues.
  - b. MS and AL were sent invoices this week for their dues so all states are current.
  - c. Commissioner Bennington moved to approve the financial reports, and Commissioner Woodruff seconded the motion – motion passes.
- III. Communications and media update – Alyssa Panepinto
  - a. Baton Rouge to New Orleans demonstration train, Rail Nation conference and New Orleans to mobile generated headlines this past quarter.
  - b. Current Facebook page:
    - i. 1,471 page followers
    - ii. 15,079 people reached
    - iii. 124 engagements
- IV. Legislative affairs update, grant updates – John Robert Smith
  - a. The D.C. Policy Update
    - i. FY24 Senate T-HUD appropriations: House
      - ii. The House proposed debilitating cuts for passenger rail
        1. \$1.952 billion (57%) reduction from FY23 for FRA
        2. \$1.577 billion (65%) reduction from FY23 for Amtrak
        3. \$417 million (35%) reduction from FY23 for the National Network
        4. \$258 million (54%) reduction from FY23 for non-advanced CRISI
        5. Elimination of fed-state partnership
      - iii. 8-10 GOP lawmakers resisted cuts due to NEC impacts (a more than 90% cut from FY23 funding levels), meaning the House T-HUD appropriations bill never made it to the floor.
    - iv. FY24 Senate T-HUD appropriations: Senate
      1. Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport (MSY) is applying for a MEGA grant to fund the intermodal station and Airport People Mover.
      2. The Senate proposed marginally increased spending for passenger rail
      3. 70% million (2%) increase for FRA from FY23 levels

4. No change for Amtrak from FY23 levels
  5. \$120 million (10%) increase for National Network from FY23 levels
  6. \$12 million (2%) increase for non-advance CRISI from FY23
  7. No change for fed-state partnership from FY23 levels
  8. This bill passed the Senate by an 82-15 vote on 11/1
- v. FY24 Senate T-HUD appropriations: Passed
1. A Continuing Resolution (CR) was proposed to extend funding at FY23 levels
  2. The House passed this on 11/14 in a 336-95 vote
  3. The Senate passed this on 11/15 via an 87-11 vote
  4. The President signed this on 11/16
- vi. This CR used a two-tiered deadline structure. Some programs and agencies are funded through 1/19/2024 and others through 2/2/2024. T-HUD is in the batch that has only received appropriations through January 19th.
- vii. STB Federal Advisory Committee on Passenger Rail: The STB intends to establish a federal advisory committee on passenger rail service.
1. This committee will have 18 members, including three at-large representatives and
  2. 2 representatives each from:
    - a. Amtrak
    - b. Commuter rail operators
    - c. Non-Amtrak intercity passenger rail operators or developers
    - d. Class I freight railroads
    - e. Rail passenger advocacy organizations
  3. 1 each from:
    - a. A state that provides intercity passenger rail funding
    - b. A Class II or Class III freight railroad
    - c. An organized rail labor association
    - d. A rail shipper or customer advocacy organization, or an individual shipper/customer
- b. Passenger Rail Hearing**
- i. On 11/29, the House Subcommittee on Railroads, Pipelines, and Hazardous Materials held a hearing on intercity passenger rail which was hostile to future high-speed rail.
  - ii. Witnesses were:
    1. Andy Daly, CSX
    2. Stacey Mortenson, San Joaquin Joint Powers Authority
    3. Lee Ohanian, Hoover Institution
    4. Kirk Watson, Mayor of Austin
  - iii. Rep. Johnson (D-GA) asked Mayor Watson specific to Crescent service between Atlanta and DFW, which the mayor gave a full-throated endorsement.
- c. Gulf Coast Rail Updates**
- d. FY18 CRISI Updates: North Rail Connector**
- i. Jackson County Port Authority now leads this project and is having monthly calls with FRA and engineers.
  - ii. There's been a change in scope, so a full NEPA re-evaluation is required and will get a final FRA review around August 2024.
  - iii. Bids will be awarded and construction will start in January 2025 so the project can finish in May 2026.
- e. FY18 CRISI Updates: New Orleans to Baton Rouge**
- i. Grant included funds for a full NEPA PE for the New Orleans to Baton Rouge corridor.
  - ii. LADOTD will complete:
    1. A full NEPA PE on the station sites in Baton Rouge and Gonzales
    2. A pre-NEPA PE for the full New Orleans to Baton Rouge corridor
  - iii. A preliminary call was held with FRA, LADOTD, and the SRC.
  - iv. LADOTD has expressed interest in matching the FY18 CRISI funds to complete the full NEPA for the corridor and is considering moving forward on doing that full NEPA.
- f. FY22 CRISI Update**
- i. Amtrak, in cooperation with the SRC, received an FY22 CRISI grant for \$178 million.
  - ii. The grant is matched with \$45 million in non-federal funding and the combined total fulfills the STB settlement agreement among Amtrak, CSX, Norfolk Southern, and the Port of Mobile
  - iii. Joint calls amongst FRA, Amtrak and the SRC have begun and will include the other infrastructure partners.
- g.** In an effort to coordinate all of the moving parts within our region, Administrator Bose has reached out to participants to engage in monthly calls.
- h. Gulf Coast Rail Outstanding Issues:**
- i. Siding and platform in Mobile
  - ii. Operating agreement with Amtrak
  - iii. Service start date
- i.** Additional grant updates: Expected Awards

- i. November-December 2023
    - 1. FY22 Corridor ID
    - 2. FY22-23 Interstate Rail Compacts
    - 3. FY24 Fed-State Partnership (National Network)
  - ii. April-May 2024: FY22-23 Restoration and Enhancement
- j. Expected NOFOs
  - 1. November-December 2023: FY22-23 Restoration and Enhancement
  - 2. December 2023-January 2024: FY23-24 CRISI
  - 3. February-March 2024: FY24 Fed-State Partnership (National Network)
  - 4. April-May 2024: FY24 Interstate Rail Compacts
- k. December Hill Visits
  - i. Chairman Ross and Vice Chair Spain will be on Capitol Hill 12/4-12/6 to meet with:
    - 1. Senators Cassidy (R-LA), Tester (D-MT), Welch (D-VT), and potentially Wicker (R-MS)
    - 2. Senate Commerce Committee
    - 3. Representatives Ezell (R-MS), Cohen (D-TN), Payne (D-NJ; Ranking Member of the House Subcommittee on Railroads, Pipelines, and Hazardous Materials), and potentially Graves (R-LA)
    - 4. FRA and Amtrak

## NEW BUSINESS:

- I. Federal Railroad Administration update – *Tomika Monterville*
- II. FRA expressed appreciation of the focus by SRC on making progress.
- III. FRA will be convening a monthly meeting of key stakeholders to give progress updates. They are underway with reviewing design plans for the Mobile station.
  - a. This will be high level meeting for FRA to share their progress with CRISI grantees.
- IV. The current grant programs are critical to coordinate and FRA spent months to determine which grants should fund which components.
- V. FRA encourages grantees to work together to apply for these grants. Applicants must determine their time and capacity to manage these grants. Don't duplicate, be strategic.
  - a. Call can include airport reps – they are impacted but should be part of working group.
  - b. She recommends developing a working group with all stakeholders who work to categorize programs in a coordinated effort with RPCs and identify which grants are most efficient to seek.
  - c. SRC will put together a suggested list for the working group to send to Tomika.
- VI. Report on Executive Committee activities – *Commissioners Ross, Spain, and Bennington*
  - a. Recently we have been meeting unanticipated hurdles and it has been a very frustrating process, because despite the activities underway, there are always obstacles in the way.
  - b. We are working with CPKC, who are great partners, to open up new economic benefits.
  - c. The Baton Rouge Health District has applied for a planning/construction transportation grant for planning a station in BR for hospital evacuations which would connect by rail with hospitals in NO during times of evacuation.
- VII. Amtrak update – Arun Rao, Director of Network Development, and Nicole Bucich, Vice President of Network Development
- VIII. These projects are at a pivotal moment as this region was selected for 2 grants and is on the cusp of other grant announcements. The corridors are in a good position for happy holidays. Two new grants were awarded to Amtrak:
  - a. **Gulf Coast Corridor Improvement Project:** \$178.4 million  
The proposed project involves project development, final design and construction activities for various track and signal-related improvements, upgrades to certain grade crossings, and improvements to certain stations along a key rail corridor in the Gulf Coast region, from New Orleans, LA to Mobile, AL.
  - b. **Mississippi-Louisiana Grade Crossing Improvement Project:** \$1.8 million  
The proposed project involves systems planning activities for a corridor study that will evaluate the safety, roadway connectivity, reliability, and potential improvements, including but not limited to trespassing prevention measures, to 395 highway-rail grade crossings on Amtrak's City of New Orleans route through Mississippi and Louisiana.

- c. LADOTD-Amtrak Service Development Agreement: On October 26, the State of Louisiana, LADOTD, and Amtrak signed a Service Development Agreement that will advance the implementation of new Amtrak service connecting New Orleans and Baton Rouge.
- d. Other pending grants:
  - FRA Corridor Identification & Development Program (Corridor ID) - Awaiting Decision (Dec 2023)**
    1. Meridian – Dallas/Fort Worth (I-20) (submitted by SRC)
    2. New Orleans – Baton Rouge (submitted by LADOTD)
    3. New Orleans – Mobile (submitted by SRC)
    4. Baton Rouge – Shreveport (submitted by SRC)
    5. Northwest Florida (submitted by City of Pensacola)
    6. Daily Sunset Limited (submitted by Amtrak)
- e. **FRA Federal-State Partnership for Intercity Passenger Rail - Awaiting Decision (Dec 2023)**
- f. **I-20 Crescent Extension:** For service planning, preliminary engineering, and environmental (submitted by Amtrak with SRC, local match from MDOT & LADOTD)
- g. **New Orleans-Baton Rouge CPKC Improvements:** Final Design and Construction (submitted by LADOTD)
- h. Yesterday FRA released the NOFO for US DOTD RAISE program for stations and applications are due at the end of Feb. 2024.
- IX. The Chairman presented the proposal from Risk pros for obtaining Directors and Officers insurance coverage.
  - a. Doug Rogers provided a cost reasonable proposal of \$1,187 per year for \$1m coverage
  - b. Commissioner Castiglia moved to approve the financial reports, and Commissioner Kell seconded the motion – motion passes.
- X. State Reports:
  - a. LA DOTD – finalizing CRISI agreement and \$8m match.
  - b. Operating agreement terms with Amtrak will be finalized soon.
  - c. BR – NO route: Each planned stop has a CEA with LA DOTD for cost share and all are eager to contribute.
  - d. The Airport is working through FAA regulations regarding the station.
  - e. RAISE grant NOFA – LA DOTD can offer technical assistance to communities who apply.
  - f. NO to Mobile – working on funding possibilities, issues with land use agreements and building tracks.
- XI. Westbank Rail Realignment Project: Gretna Mayor Belinda Constant and Charles Tillotson, Executive Director at Plaquemines Port
  - a. The downtown area of Gretna is regularly impeded by freight railroad traffic.
  - b. Mayor Constant has worked with multiple partners including the ports, railroad companies and partners such as DOTD and RPC to develop a solution.
  - c. An alternate route has been identified that would modify the route alignment and re-route the freight traffic to an area with far less at-grade crossings.
  - d. The SRC supports both passenger and freight rail issues and will support the progress of this project in the future.
- XII. Feasibility and market research studies – Brent Rosen, Assistant Dean for Corporate Relations at Tulane University
  - a. Tulane University students can be engaged to study and conduct research on issues related to projects such as those underway by SRC.

## OLD BUSINESS:

### SCHEDULE OF UPCOMING MEETINGS IN 2024:

- I. March 8 ; June 7; Sept. 13 ; Dec. 6 – locations TBD

## ADJOURNMENT