

SOUTHERN RAIL COMMISSION

Meeting Minutes

Friday, December 5, 2014
9:00am-12:00pm

SRC Members in attendance: Jack Hamilton, Steve Carter, Michael Jackson, Claire Austin, Brent Warr, John Spain, Phil Jones, Greg White, Kay Kell, Knox Ross, Larry Watts, Chance McNeely (LA Governor's designee), Roy Woodruff, Toby Bennington, Jack Campbell (proxy for Billy McFarland),

Others in attendance: Kristin Gisleson Palmer, Bryan Jones, Dean Goodell, Tim Basilica, Rachel DiResto, Jessica Kemp, John Robert Smith, Joe McAndrew, Dan Deely, Todd Stennis, David Dawes (Vitter's office), Karen Parsons, Walter Brooks, Tucson Roberts, Wiley Blakenship, David Ewing, Sharon Balfour (DOTD), Natalie Cook (by phone)

I. WELCOME/CALL TO ORDER with three special guest presentations

- A. Chairman Knox Ross welcomed everyone to the meeting and led the Pledge of Allegiance.
- B. Walter Brooks, Executive Director of the New Orleans Regional Planning Commission welcomed all guests and gave an overview of passenger rail activities underway by NOPRC:
- NORPC is working on rail improvements at Union Passenger Terminal and succeeded in working with Amtrak to get environmental clearance so that construction can begin. UPT also ties in with the streetcar system now connected with the new line on Loyola.
 - NORPC in partnership with BRAF and CRPC completed a feasibility study for passenger rail between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. The business communities are supportive because of job growth coming along corridor and upgrading the tracks provides an opportunity for additional freight and passenger rail.
 - NORPC hopes to work with KCS to build new bridge at Bonnet Carre and has identified funding for launching an EIS in 2015. Most important is building relationship with KCS.
 - NORPC recently met with DOTD to discuss upgrading rail crossings to improve safety in each parish along this corridor, and identifying available funds to improve these.
 - NORPC is also studying the airport to downtown connection but there are tough engineering issues to overcome.
 - To improve freight traffic, the final design for replacing the Albanaster Bridge will go to construction in 2016. The New Orleans rail gateway project has become controversial due to the need for rerouting freight.
 - NORPC is working to relocate the freight rail line on Hwy 23 in Gretna where there are over 90 at-grade crossings. The new more efficient route would go along the Harvey Canal/Peters road corridor. This proposal has support from the Plaquemine Port and from Rio Grand Pacific Railroad.

- C. **Wiley Blakenship**, Executive Director of the Coastal Alabama Partnership (CAP) made brief remarks about the regional strategic plan for the Alabama Coastal Region.
- The Coastal Alabama Partnership was formed as a business alliance to address critical issues such as transportation and to drive conversation and leadership to accomplish projects. CAP's job is to support accountability of planning commissions in the 8 county region.
 - The Mayor of Mobile is supportive of restoring passenger rail. CAP is driving regional strategic plan across 2 counties, and is working with local officials to implement local plans. CAP can partner with SRC, and take the plans of SRC into the work of this organization.
- D. **David Ewing**, Executive Directors of the States for Passenger Rail addressed the SRC and explained that the SRC played a pivotal role in convinced congressional staff that Section 207 of PRIIA, which addresses on time performance of longer distance trains, provision was a needed provision in law.
- The goal of States for Passenger Rail is to find dedicated source of revenue for passenger rail and they have frequent meetings with congressional staff, bipartisan basis,
 - SRC is not currently a member although the State of Louisiana is a member. Although SRC is well represented in DC currently, there could be value added from closer association with other rail entities. Also SRC could enrich the group as part of national system, as opposed to a fragmented approach and join a more formal coordination advocating for federal legislation. Dues are small and you can participate in bi-monthly conference calls.
 - States for Passenger Rail works to impact national policy - currently they are establishing a standardized billing procedure for state-supported trains, which could impact the New Orleans to Baton Rouge line in the future.
 - The critical Supreme Court case ruling on Section 207 will impact all service on Amtrak because it will set the standards for the long-distance network for on-time performance. If the railroads are not held to these, Amtrak cannot be more efficient, and the market segment for service and ridership will decline.

II. Old Business

- A. Approval of Minutes of the meeting from the September 12, 2014 Southern Rail Commission meeting in Birmingham. Toby asked that the minutes be corrected to reflect that there is no longer need for further discussion about meeting frequency. Claire motioned to approve minutes, Roy seconded - motion approved.
- B. Report on the Multi-State Rail Meeting in New Orleans. *-John Spain*
- The Multi-State Rail Meeting and the maps that were created for this meeting show the significant amount of rail planning activity in our neighboring states of Florida, Texas, Tennessee and Georgia. Texas wants to connect Dallas to Atlanta, which is a route that would pass through all our states.
 - FRA presented the software tool called Connect, which looks at all current transportation (air, truck, car, rail) between large population centers/city pairs in

planning for passenger rail lines. The meeting was successful with FRA had 4 staff present.

- Although there were no formal commitments made, ongoing communication and coordination with other states is critical. Also the FRA highlighted their new opportunity to participate in FRA-led multi-state planning and the SRC has submitted a letter of interest. The meeting raised the profile and credibility of the SRC with DOT and FRA, and the feds are paying more attention.

C. Update on the New Orleans-Baton Rouge Passenger Rail project and use of federal earmarks *-John Spain*

- HNTB completed the feasibility study in February 2014. The next steps include finding funding to replace the Bonnet Carre trestle (\$60m). Spain intends to set a meeting with KCS president at the national office in early 2015 to begin to work with them to address freight needs.
- Previously SRC was successful in obtaining federal earmarks, and in many cases these are still in place. Spain would like SRC to consider authorizing these funds to be used on this corridor for improving grade crossings.
- David explained that the FY14 USDOT appropriation repurposed old grants, so many of these funds are at risk if not used soon.
- John Robert Smith said that if the earmarks are still in place, Thad Cochran can assist in keeping funds intact for projects that Amtrak needs to do at certain areas along the gulf coast corridors. SRC needs to identify other projects that qualify for these funds, in particular in MS. One earmark of \$500K for new siding between Slidell and Hattisburg was never expended - waiting on match from MS. Earmarked funds are designated only for high speed routes.
- Phil Jones explained that DOTD is spending rail safety funding from 1103c (highway trust fund dollars) on rail crossings. Last year \$220m was allocated per state and the SRC secured this type of funding in the past.
- Claire made a motion to allow Louisiana DOTD to use earmarks from LA specific projects. Walt amended the motion to allow \$1M to go to LA DOTD for grade crossings (will require 50/50 match), Claire seconded – and the motion passed.

D. The Louisiana Super Region Rail Authority *-Kristin Gisleson Palmer*

- The Louisiana Super Region Rail Authority, formed by Legislative Act 858, convened in the fall of 2013 with board membership appointed by the governing entities of 6 parishes along the rail corridor, namely Orleans, Jefferson, St. Charles, St. John the Baptist, Ascension, and East Baton Rouge parishes. More recently St. James Parish is making its appointments to join the compact.
- Since 2013, the authority has adopted bylaws, elected officers, initiated development of a strategic action plan, and established standing committees along with the Executive Committee: Funding, Outreach and Station Area Planning – these are charged with working together to execute the plan.

- The Funding committee is looking at the local streams of revenue that each parish will potentially contribute for operations, the outreach committee is reaching out to gubernatorial candidates, legislators and building the local base of support by stakeholders, and the station committee is exploring standards and best practices along with aligning the current planning efforts underway at each station.
- As more than \$20B in near-term industrial development has been announced for the super region, investing in lasting improvements such as passenger rail will secure our ability to compete as a super region.
- The workforce issues are driving the growing support, need and momentum behind the project. We are laying the groundwork in hopes that the next governor sees the economic development potential and more fully supports the efforts.
- This authority coming together represents unprecedented collaboration among regional leaders unified in their mission to implement this critical connector of people, economies and institutions. It can be a great model for how to foster and demonstrate local commitment to a regional project.

III. New Business

- A. Discussion of meeting changes to allow the Commission to participate in the Mississippi Gulf Coast 10 year anniversary of Katrina. -Knox Ross
 - Knox Ross said SRC was asked by Vincent Creole/Colonel Nelson to do a presentation on MS Gulf Coast June 17th, at an event honoring the anniversary date of Katrina.
 - There may be an opportunity to set the SRC meeting around this date. Knox will seek more details and present them at the March meeting.

- B. Discussion of extending an invitation to Texas, Florida and Georgia states to join the Commission. -Knox Ross and Charlie Ozier
 - Before an invitation to TX, FL, GA is extended, AL, LA and MS legislatures, assuming state enabling language is the same, must amend the bylaws and establish procedure to have other members
 - Spain made a motion to ask each state legislature to give SRC the authority to invite others states and pursue this legislation in upcoming sessions. The Executive Committee will review statutes in each state to make recommendations on what amendments are needed so they can be broad and flexible. Toby seconded --- and the motion was passed.
 - In the meantime SRC can consider inviting elected officials from states to attend meetings to expand the number of people we keep informed. Also SRC should approach other states to identify key people who have influence
 - Each state should be able to report back by June meeting if they were legislatively successful.

- C. The Executive Committee meeting in Washington in February to meet with Amtrak, Congressional leaders and the new Administrator of the FRA. -Knox Ross
 - The Executive Committee is planning a meeting during Washington Mardi Gras to meet with Congressional leaders and the new Administrator of the FRA.

D. Visit on the Downeaster and Vermont Rail Service in May 2015. - John Spain

- The Executive Committee was invited by Amtrak in May 2015 to visit and ride on the Downeaster and Vermont ,which are both models of new service that will offer insights on implementation and managing services. For now, only a limited number may attend, but the invitation to others will be extended if available.

E. Washington Update, Status of FRA Application, Potential for TIGER Grants in 2015-John Robert Smith

- John Robert said the national election changes should strengthen SRC's hand federally. New committee leadership includes Thad Cochran - Chairman of Appropriations, Shelby – Chair of Banking, Wicker – EPW, Vitter – Transportation, Scalise - Majority Whip and (yet to be determined) Sessions –Budget Committee Chair.
- SRC applied for the FRA grant and ther is still a need for local elected officials to call Foxx and Szabo with support. The grant will not be awarded until next year because of the change in leadership at FRA.
- T4 is forming a state level advocacy coalition to explore best practices for raising state level transporting funding and SRC is invited to join. T4 is also issuing a report on innovative MPOs and working with Amtrak to develop a station area planning toolkit to tell leaders/mayors how to plan. This resource will be completed in late 2015 – more details to come at the March meeting.

IV. Finance and Administration Report

A. Monthly Cost Summary Report Review -Natalie Cook by phone

- Natalie reported that the 2012 audit is in the early stages and if you have questions, call or email. For the 2013, the auditor issued an unqualified opinion.
- October 1 starts the new fiscal year and the spreadsheets reflect the monthly costs (for October) and YTD summary along with detail on the operating accounts – interest-bearing accounts (state specific accounts).
- Dean Goodell confirmed that the Louisiana dues were transferred to the operating account – this occurred on July 2014 (and represented a \$5000 credit from previous year).
- Natalie asked when the 2014-2015 dues can be issued – Knox requested invoices be sent after Jan 1, 2015. Toby requested that AL invoice be sent to Commissioner Billy McFarland (can be emailed).
- It was also requested that the new name be changed on all reports to Southern rail commission on next audit report – for cover and on financial statements.
- Toby moved to approve the 2012 Audit, seconded by Greg – motion approved.
- John Spain moved to approve expense reports, seconded by Walt - motion approved.

B. Discussion and approval of new contracts for services with Transportation for America, from Transportation for America, Center for Planning Excellence and Southeast Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission. -John Spain

- John explained that with the approval of the financial report, members also approved renewal for the contracts with Natalie Cook, Transportation for America, and Center for Planning Excellence.

V. Miscellaneous

Next Meetings:

March 6th, 2015 - Alabama

June 5th, 2015 - Mississippi

September 4th, 2015 - Louisiana

December 4th, 2015 - Alabama

F. Meeting Adjourned