

Meeting of the Southern Rail Commission

March 5, 2021 9:00am-12:00pm

Zoom

Call to Order: *Commissioner Spain*

Roll Call

SRC Commissioner Attendees: John Spain, Knox Ross, Renee Lapeyrolerie, Roy Woodruff, Toby Bennington, Stephen McNair, Steven Brom, David Clark, Kay Kell, Walt Leger

Guests: John Robert Smith (Transportation for America), Phil Jones (LA Multimodal Commerce), Dan Dealy, Rachel DiResto (Emergent Method), Maggie Woodruff (NO Regional Planning Commission), Todd Stennis (Amtrak), Marc Magliari (Amtrak), David Handera (Amtrak), Jim Blair (Amtrak), Janice Hamilton (Alabama Public Service Commission), Carmen Chambers and Christina Conway (Manning Architects), Libby Messick (Calhoun Anniston MPO), Josh Stubbs (MSDOT), Dean Goodell (LA DOTD), Robert Eaton (Amtrak), Jonathan Bird (Corps of Engineers), Dennis Barrett (Transportation for America), Mike Lee, Marc Magliari, John Sharp, Andrew Lodriguss, D. Singleton, Brad Gunter, Emily Pounds (NBC 15), WLOX2, David Zoller, J Driscoll, Virgil Payne, Bob Johnston, Jane Covington, Dale Leisch, Scott Kirkpatrick, Bryan Jones, Elizabeth Lawlor, Guy Busby, Greg White, Jonathan Byrd, J. Riggs, Robert Smith

Pledge of Allegiance and Prayer – *Knox Ross*

REGULAR BUSINESS:

- I. Approval of the minutes from the meeting of December 4, 2020
 - a. Commissioner Bennington moved to approve the minutes, and Commissioner Roy seconded the motion – motion passes.

- II. Legislative Affairs Update - *John Robert Smith*
 - a. Railroad Rehabilitation and Financing Innovation Act (RRFIA)
 - i. Sen. Thun, and Hassem, reintroduced bill as loan program, 30b unused loan authority, borrowing has some risk, and changes are coming:
 1. **Streamline the application process:** establishes an expedited credit review process for loans that meet certain financial and operational criteria. The bill also requires DOT to provide applicants with regular updates on the status of their application.
 2. **Improve program flexibility:** The bill improves program flexibility, including longer loan terms for certain rail infrastructure projects and increases flexibility for DOT to evaluate collateral and creditworthiness.
 3. **Provide dedicated funding for RRIF financing costs:** the legislation authorizes funding to cover financing costs associated with providing RRIF loans. Half of the funding is dedicated solely to shortline railroads, while the remainder is reserved for passenger rail projects.
 - b. American Rescue Act of 2021 (Covid relief) – budget reconciliation bill under review by Senate, expected to be sent to President by March 14th, likely to be passed.
 - i. Provides \$19 trillion aimed at responding to the pandemic.
 1. \$30m for transit
 2. \$1.5 billion for Amtrak
 - a. We expect the Senate to add an additional \$200 million for Amtrak.
 - b. This funding would require Amtrak to restore daily long-distance service within 90 days of the bill becoming law and recall all furloughed employees by October 1.

- c. Surface Transportation Reauthorization
 - i. Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure will reintroduce a similar version of the INVEST Act that passed in the House last Congressional session.
 - 1. Transportation for America has shared legislative language to create ten passenger rail commissions with the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee and are working with committee staff to include this language in the next reauthorizations. The language was also shared with:
 - a. Rep. Donald Payne (NJ, Chairman of the Railroads, Pipelines, and Hazardous Materials), Rep. Price (NC, Chairman of the Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation, Housing and Urban Development), Rep. Moulton (MA), Rep. Blumenauer (OR), and Rep. Cohen (TN)
 - 2. We've met with other states to provide our model. We are asking Congress to not only allow for the creation of other entities but also to include some modest funding to support our ongoing operations work which could be matched with the state dues.
 - 3. Commissions would be given preference when applying for federal grant programs. The federal funding cap is proposed of \$2m per year.
 - 4. One objective is to create a rail caucus in Congress across multiple states.
 - 5. Some states have committed major funding to support studies and perhaps they would receive some credit for state funds spent in the past, but most likely these funds would need to be matched with new funding.
 - ii. **Senate:** Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (NY) will allow committees of jurisdiction to introduce their respective reauthorization titles.
 - 1. The committees and their jurisdictions are:
 - a. Commerce Committee: Rail
 - b. Banking and Finance Committee: Transit
 - c. Committee on Environment and Public Works (EPW): Roads and Highways
 - 2. Transportation for America has been working closely with the Commerce Committee over the last 2 years with reauthorization ideas and expect language to establish 10 passenger rail commission to be included in reauthorization.
- d. Second Budget Reconciliation
 - i. If a Surface Transportation Reauthorization cannot receive bipartisan support, they will move to a second budget reconciliation that will focus on infrastructure with a focus on passenger rail.
 - ii. Biden is a supporter of passenger rail and may give preference to those priorities.
 - iii. Considerations for a second budget reconciliation are being put together now but would not be introduced until the passage of the American Rescue Plan Act.
 - iv. Transportation for America is working to ensure SRC priorities are addressed in a second budget reconciliation.
- e. Virtual Hill Meetings
 - i. The Southern Rail Commission, represented by John Spain (LA), Knox Spain (MS), and Stephen McNair (AL), held its annual Hill visits virtually with the following congressional offices:
 - 1. **Louisiana Delegation:** Sen. Cassidy and Rep. Garret Graves (House T&I Committee)
 - 2. **Mississippi Delegation:** Sen. Hyde-Smith (Appropriations), Sen. Wicker (Ranking Member of Commerce)
 - 3. **Alabama Delegation:** Sen. Shelby (Ranking Member of Appropriations), Rep. Carl, Rep. Sewell
 - 4. **Senate:** Sen. Cantwell (WA, Chair of Commerce), Sen. Reed (RI), Sen. Tester (MT), Sen. Manchin (WV), Sen. Daines (MT), Sen. Rosen (NV). All are supportive of passenger rail.

5. **House:** Rep. DeFazio (OR, Chair of Transportation and Infrastructure), Rep. Sam Graves (MO, Ranking Member of Transportation and Infrastructure), Rep. Price (NC, Chair of Appropriations Subcommittee Transportation, Housing and Urban Development), Rep. Cohen (TN), Rep. Moulton (MA).
 6. FRA Acting Administrator Amit Bose, who will become Deputy Administrator for FRA and other FRA support staff.
 - a. Stated SRC project was one of the top three priorities for their office
 7. The “asks” during these policy meetings included:
 - a. Additional corridors governed by new commissions.
 - b. Expanding long distance daily service to connect entire network and amenities with quality food and service.
 - c. Balance to Amtrak board of directors to include Southern representatives to reflect entire country.
 - d. Improving the relationship between freight and passenger rail with incentives for cooperation.
- f. Amtrak 2035 Plan
- i. Amtrak shared their upcoming draft plan for investment with SRC:
 1. Includes New Orleans to Mobile and New Orleans to Baton Rouge routes.
 - ii. In response to Amtrak’s release of their 2035 plan, the Southern Rail Commission submitted its comments and feedback outlining the following priorities to potentially amend the plan to address these issues:
 1. Implement daily service of the *Crescent* between Meridian, Mississippi and Dallas/Ft. Worth, Texas.
 2. Explore the split of the *City of New Orleans* at Carbondale, Illinois to connect part of the that train directly to St. Louis – would give a choice to link to Chicago or St. Louis.
 3. Restore daily long-distance service between New Orleans and Orlando/Tampa/Miami, Florida – this is one of SRC’s long range goals.
 4. Implement motorcoach service between the *City of New Orleans* and Memphis and the *Crescent* in Birmingham.
 5. Restore daily service and full-service amenities, including full-service dining and lounge services, ticketing, and checked baggage on all existing long-distance passenger train routes.
- g. John Robert introduced Dennis Barrett who is the new T4America staff person supporting the legislative work of the SRC.

III. Amtrak Report – Dr. David Handera, Vice President of Stations and Accessibility, and Jim Blair, Senior Director, Host Railroads

- a. Mr. Blair stated that Amtrak participated in a joint study with CSX and Norfolk Southern started in Jan 2019 which was a RTC modeling effort. Although all parties initially worked diligently, there were some delays and a 7-month study turned into a year-long effort. Amtrak became concerned that the study was not progressing.
- b. Amtrak reached out to the freight railroads to endeavor to start service in Jan 2022 and have invited their feedback.
- c. Amtrak has also mobilized to hire people to support the new service, identify equipment to use in service, started planning and marketing efforts. Amtrak has a full team working towards implementation to start service early next year.
- d. Dr. Handera said Amtrak is excited about starting the Gulf Coast service.
- e. Last month, key Amtrak staff visited the gulf coast and walked each station, meeting with engineers, reviewing plans, and assembling a list of needs on station-by-station basis.
- f. The key component to starting service is to ensure stations are accessible to board and alight safely. The train cannot stop or start at a station without a platform.

- g. Amtrak is evaluating plans for Amtrak complete the remaining platform work, in partnership with each city. Amtrak can complete the signage, power, and lighting work needed in platform areas. Amtrak can cover costs of improvements within the ROW of the railroad. Amtrak will pay for repairs and the cities are responsible for access to platforms.
- h. Some locations will need temporary platforms to be brought in.
- i. Amtrak is working with FRA on financial components and looking at needs for starting and continuing service.
- j. Amtrak is proposing two phases – working with existing conditions initially and long-term, installing new platforms in every location with depot improvements. Because Amtrak is able to use the existing platforms with minor modifications – this is a huge win for starting service.
- k. Although Amtrak will work through various agreements with each city, below are the improvements Amtrak is willing to invest in contingent upon FRA approval:
 - i. Bay St. Louis –
 - 1. Phase 1: can use the existing platform, tactile work is to be done including signage and lighting, and City could address path of travel improvements such as parking.
 - 2. Phase 2 – Amtrak constructs new ADA platform and completes other path of travel improvements.
 - ii. Gulfport –
 - 1. Phase 1: can use the existing platform, tactile work is to be done including signage and lighting, and City could address path of travel improvements such as parking.
 - 2. Phase 2 – Amtrak constructs new ADA platform and completes other path of travel improvements.
 - iii. Biloxi –
 - 1. Phase 1: can use the existing platform, tactile work is to be done including signage and lighting, and City could address path of travel improvements such as parking.
 - 2. Phase 2 – Amtrak constructs new ADA platform and completes other path of travel improvements. Platform will be 400 ft in length with new lighting.
 - iv. Pascagoula –
 - 1. Biggest challenge here because Amtrak will need to bring in a temporary platform and would need to identify location and path of travel to depot.
 - 2. Phase 2 – Amtrak constructs new ADA platform and completes other path of travel improvements.
 - v. Mobile –
 - 1. Phase 1: can use the existing platform, tactile work is to be done including signage and lighting, and City could address path of travel improvements such as parking.
 - 2. Phase 2 – Amtrak constructs new ADA platform and completes other path of travel improvements at current location.
 - vi. John Robert restated Amtrak’s intent is to pay for repairs to existing and bringing in new ADA complaint platforms in Phase 2, subject to FRA approval.
 - vii. Mobile will build a permanent platform when Mobile’s alternative analysis study identifies the final site.
 - viii. Commissioner McNair stated the expectation in Mobile is that the station will be constructed at Brookley Airport and requested that Amtrak work with us since downtown is not the preferred site by local stakeholders. The airport master plan includes shared parking and transit connection.
 - ix. Amtrak cannot yet commit to investing in additional locations in Mobile, but will work closely with Mobile on their plans, and the airport location would be treated as a new stop and would follow normal course of new station development.
 - x. Amtrak cannot commit, and what it will take to create platform in new location,
 - xi. Phil Jones stated that Louisiana DOTD conducted a station study with an inventory of items a station should have and are encouraging stations in LA to plan for these elements. Will provide this to Amtrak.

- l. Dr. Handera said Amtrak also made a trip to the Picayune station: it looks beautiful, and the previous facility has been transformed into a new accessible, well lit platform that connects seamlessly to parking lot and area well maintained. Also met at Greenwood and Jackson to review work underway.
- m. Amtrak met with city leaders at these stations to restate our commitment to service. Amtrak is making investments in maintaining and improving depots under renovation to provide the best experience to customers and residents and to put our best foot forward.
- n. The SRC made grants to each city to improve their stations, and they will now pause their work within the ROW that will now be covered by Amtrak. FRA agreed to allow them to redirect their planning to the needs outside of the ROW.
- o. SRA also recently issued a NOFA which closes today at 5pm. If this funding is not allocated for platforms, it can be reallocated toward other allowable projects under the requirements.
- p. Commissioner David Clark stated that Alabama Commissioners have assured the Governor and other leaders that they will receive a RTC modeling study prior to return of Amtrak service. Mobile has committed to operating funding for the first three years contingent on the RTC study. The port is the biggest economic driver in Alabama and Alabama commissioners are supportive of passenger rail service as long as it does not interfere with port operations.
- q. Commissioner Spain said SRC is committed to ensuring passenger service works for freight and aims to bring those conversations to a positive outcome.

IV. Financial and Administrative Report-*Knox Ross*

- a. SRC is working on 2022 budget but it is still in flux because of NOFA which closes today.
- b. SRC hope to be reimbursed for grant administration by the FRA.
- c. Commissioner Bennington moved to approve the financials, and Commissioner Kell seconded – motion passes.

V. Communications and Media Update-*Rachel Diresto*

- a. The SRC has received lots of attention from media due to its blog postings, eblasts, and press releases.
- b. Commissioners are encouraged to invite constituents to sign up on the website to receive news and alerts from SRC.

OLD BUSINESS:

- I. Report on Executive Committee activities – covered under Legislative Affairs report
- II. Update on Amtrak & CSX Working Group on capital costs for Gulf Coast rail project – covered in Amtrak’s report
- III. Update on NOFA 2021 – *John Robert Smith*
 - 1. Responses are due today at 5pm, SRC is expecting applications from LA and MS.
 - 2. SRC will vet applications and share full list with Commissioners and will compile total number requested.
- IV. State Reports: SRC is anxiously awaiting Biden’s infrastructure package announcement which should contain funding for passenger rail.
 - a. Louisiana:
 - i. Spain welcomed Walt Leger back as a Louisiana commissioner.
 - b. Mississippi:
 - i. Knox stated that Amtrak’s commitment to upgrading the platforms will provide the additional expertise needed and will allow cities to complete other work to make their stations attractive and accessible.
 - c. Alabama:
 - i. Stephen McNair stated his commitment to working with the commission in making progress in our efforts.

SCHEDULE OF UPCOMING MEETINGS:

Note that the next meeting of the Commission in June also **could be virtual. We will keep you informed as time gets closer**

- I. June 4, 2021 Louisiana – in person in Baton Rouge, dependent on health concerns
- II. September 3, 2021 Alabama
- III. December 3, 2021 Mississippi

ADJOURNMENT