

# *Meeting of the Southern Rail Commission*

September 10, 2021

MINUTES

**Call to Order:** *Chairman Wiley Blankenship*

## **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 III, Wiley Blankenship, John Clyde Riggs, Mayor Adrian Perkins

### **Other Zoom Attendees:**

Phil Jones (LA DOTD), Dean Goodell (LA DOTD), Dinero Washington (SporTran), Bryan Jones (HNTB), Todd Stennis (Amtrak), Maggie Woodruff (NO Regional Planning Commission), Ed Wikoff, Mary Elizabeth Harper, Janice Hamilton, John Robert Smith (T4America), Dennis Barrett (T4America), Katherine Guidry, Bryan Jones, WLOX, Robert Smith, Bob Johnston, Mike Monsour, Rachel DiResto

## **Pledge of Allegiance and Prayer**

### **REGULAR BUSINESS:**

- I. Approval of the minutes from the meeting on June 4, 2021
  - a. John Spain moved to approve the minutes, and Toby Bennington seconded the motion – motion passes.
- II. Financial and Administrative Report - *Knox Ross*
  - a. The financial balance has not changed much since last meeting since there have been no major expenses. Still carrying over the year end surplus of \$26,906.
- III. Communications and Media Update – *Rachel DiResto*
  - a. Rachel DiResto reported that the SRC has had 24 news media mentions since the last meeting.
  - b. Social media followers are growing:
    - i. Current page likes: 1,023
      1. In Q3, social media promotions results:
      2. 14,276 people reached
      3. 759 post engagements
      4. 555 website visits
    - ii. The most recent promotion in August brought 203 new website visits
- IV. Legislative Affairs Update - *John Robert Smith and Dennis Barrett*
  - a. Surface Transportation Reauthorization:
    - i. On August 10, the Senate passed the bipartisan infrastructure bill, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA)
    - ii. The policy used to draft the highway and rail titles of the bill came from the Surface Transportation Reauthorization Act from the Environment and Public Works Committee (EPW) and the Surface Transportation Investment Act from the Commerce Committee.
    - iii. Both passed out of their respective committees with strong bipartisan support
    - iv. IIJA included many of the priorities the SRC has advocated for on the Hill
    - v. The bill is expected to have a vote in the House before September 27
  - b. SRC Legislative Wins:

- i. SRC Legislative Wins
- ii. Creates a federal grant program that incentivizes states to create interstate rail commissions, modeled after the SRC. This program is funded at \$3 million per year where commissions can receive a federal match of \$1 million. SRC will be “grandfathered in” to the program
- iii. Amtrak Board Reform to have more national representation
  - 1. Replaces the Amtrak President with the CEO
  - 2. 1 person with a disability
  - 3. 2 people within the NEC
  - 4. 4 people outside the NEC
    - a. 2 including who live on long distance routes and
    - b. 2 from a State with State-supported routes
  - 5. 2 people from any of the three services: NEC, in a State with long-distance or a State-supported route
- c. Other Highlights:
  - i. Includes \$66 billion for passenger and freight rail improvements
  - ii. \$50 million per year for Restoration and Enhancement Grants
  - iii. Will now be 6-year grants that could lower the yearly average compared to the current 3-year grants
  - iv. \$2 billion per year for Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) program
  - v. Establishes a Rail Crossing Elimination Program funded at \$1.1 billion per year
  - vi. 80/20 Federal Cost Share
  - vii. Establishes a Federal-State Partnership Intercity Passenger Rail Grants at \$8.7 billion per year
  - viii. Includes a phased funding agreement between the Federal Government and the eligible recipient
  - ix. \$1.5 billion per year for the Local and Regional Project Assistance Program (Build/TIGER)
  - x. Removes the 3-year limit on Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) Improvement Program
  - xi. Positive Changes to the RRIF program
- d. Budget Reconciliation
  - i. On August 11, the Senate approved a \$3.5 trillion budget resolution that started the reconciliation process
  - ii. The House agreed to the budget resolution governing the reconciliation process on August 24
  - iii. The reconciliation process must follow the “Byrd rule” which prevents any language not related to spending from being included
  - iv. The House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee will begin markup of their bill on September 14th and expect legislative text to be released on Friday, September 10
- e. Funding Allocations:
  - i. \$60 billion for the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure (Highways, Rail and Transit)
  - ii. \$83 billion for the Senate Committee on Commerce (Rail)
  - iii. \$67 billion to the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works (Highways)
  - iv. \$332 billion to the Senate Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs (Transit)

**OLD BUSINESS:**

- I. Report on Executive Committee activities - *Spain, Ross, Blankenship*

- a. Update on the Gulf Coast passenger service: This is an exciting time with lots of interest. Knox explained that discussions are underway on the opportunities to run passenger rail from Shreveport to Texas, and potentially from New Orleans to Shreveport. Recent support has been expressed by the Mississippi DOT's rail division who is very supportive of SRC work.
- II. State Reports:**
- a. Louisiana –
    - i. Governor Edwards recently convened a meeting to discuss next steps following the potential merger of KCS with CP and expressed his interest in the state purchasing the rail line between New Orleans and Baton Rouge.
    - ii. The Governor wants to connect north and south with rail during his tenure.
    - iii. CP offers more opportunities and could ultimately connect beyond LA to Meridian and Atlanta.
    - iv. This is the closest we have ever been to the opportunity to institute service between New Orleans and Baton Rouge with significant funding potentially available.
    - v. Walt Leger stated that he briefed JEDCO and they continue to be excited about connectivity by rail.
  - b. Mississippi –
    - i. The station projects are moving forward and John Robert Smith continues to work with them.
    - ii. SRC hopes to announce the NOFA 2021 awards soon pending final approval by the FRA on the grant details.
  - c. Alabama –
    - i. Alabama SRC commissioners are meeting monthly.
    - ii. There was only minimal track damage from Hurricane Ida.

**NEW BUSINESS:**

- I. Election of Officers –**
  - a. Every two years the Executive Committee leadership is selected and the Chair position rotates to another state.
  - b. Kay nominated Knox as Chair, Walt seconded, the motion passes.
  - c. Roy nominated Walt as Vice Chair, but he respectfully declined.
  - d. Wiley nominated Steven McNair for Secretary, John Clyde Riggs seconds, the motion passes.
  - e. Walt nominated Spain as Vice Chair, Knox seconded, the motion passes.
- II. Updates from Amtrak - *Todd Stennis and Marc Magliari***
  - a. Amtrak is working on service recovery following IDA:
    - i. On Tuesday, the Crescent was restored.
    - ii. The Sunset limited is open, suffered less damage.
    - iii. The City of NOLA service will be restored on Tuesday Sept 14 at the earliest and had some damage around the lake area.
    - iv. CSX route had some damage east of Gentilly and west of pearl river, may be fully restored by now.
  - b. Amtrak has been corresponding with DC staff regarding I-120 corridor opportunities.
  - c. Amtrak has been working on ADA projects – update:
    - i. Tuscaloosa, Anniston – ADA platforms are under design
    - ii. Birmingham – slated for 2022 for design, will utilize some SRC grant funds
    - iii. Laurel and Greenwood MS are close to completion
    - iv. Hattiesburg, Yazoo, and Meridian are slated for completion in 2022
    - v. Picayune was completed
    - vi. Work is starting soon on Lafayette and Slidell LA stations

1. Will be reaching out to Dean and Phil on these projects
- b. Amtrak had a productive meeting with New Orleans Airport Authority regarding potential station sites with positive options identified for short- and long-term locations.
- c. Vicky – requested that Amtrak reach out regarding lease with CSX.
- d. John Bender from Amtrak will be reaching out to each gulf coast station lead soon.

**SCHEDULE OF UPCOMING MEETING:**

- I. December 3, 2021 in Alabama, probably in Mobile
- II. March 11, 2022 in Louisiana, hopefully in New Orleans
- III. June 2022 in Mississippi in Bay St. Louis

**EXECUTIVE SESSION**

**ADJOURNMENT**