

Meeting of the Southern Rail Commission

March 6, 2020 9:00am-12:00pm
Baton Rouge Area Foundation
100 North Street (IBM Building) 9th floor
Baton Rouge, LA 70802

Call to Order: *Chairman Wiley Blankenship*

Roll Call

Attendees: Wiley Blankenship, John Spain, Knox Ross, Steve Carter, Toby Bennington, Roy Woodruff, Jerome Wall, Renee A. Lapeyrolerie, Stephen McNair; Shawn Wilson

On Phone: Dan Dealy

Guests: Joni Emmons, John Robert Smith, Maggie Woodruff, Todd Stennis, Marc Magliari, Dean Goddell, Michael Monsour, Phil Jones, Brandon Hebron

Pledge of Allegiance and Prayer

Special Recognitions

- Commissioner Spain introduced Renee Lapeyrolerie and welcomed her as a new commissioner for the state of Louisiana. She has been appointed Commissioner of the state's Office of Multimodal Commerce.
- He also mentioned that Commissioner Wall and Commissioner Leger's appointments will end on March 23rd, and he thanked them for their service on the Southern Rail Commission.

REGULAR BUSINESS

- I. Approval of the minutes from the meeting of December 6, 2019
 - Commissioner Spain moved to approve the minutes, and Commissioner Bennington seconded the motion.
- II. Legislative Affairs Update - *John Robert Smith*
 - Implementation of CRISI grant funds
 - The SRC has received \$33 million of federal funds and \$33 million in matched funds from the States of Louisiana and Mississippi and the County of Mobile. The Federal Railroad Administration believes that environmental assessments will have to be conducted for each project. T4A has suggested conducting a pre-NEPA for the entire corridor, to be conducted by MDOT for Mississippi projects. T4A will work with FRA to develop a checklist for MDOT to look for in their pre-assessment. This pre-NEPA may allow projects within the corridor to be covered by the categorical exclusion and exempt from a full environmental assessment. T4A has also talked to FRA about granting pre-award authority so that MDOT staff time could be covered by CRISI funds.
 - Administration of CRISI funds will be similar to administration of station planning grants. MDOT will manage Mississippi projects; CSX will construct the projects within their right of way. MDOT will pay CSX for improvements within their right of way, MDOT will invoice the SRC, the invoice will go to T4A, T4A will request money from FRA, then SRC will disburse funds to MDOT. T4A is

working with the FRA to establish a process to allow MDOT to directly bill the FRA.

- Amtrak will work with FRA on an operating agreement, and that's when there will be evaluation of the numbers. State grade crossing improvement funds will be prioritized as an in-kind match to federal CRISI funds. CSX will do work, MDOT will monitor/administer work and confirm to the SRC that the work has been completed per specification. MDOT will audit the work and submit invoices to the SRC for payment. For larger, more complex projects, the SRC may want to consider contracting a firm to administer construction.
 - State DOTs could submit their administrative fees for oversight of CRISI projects to the SRC for reimbursement. The FRA looks to the SRC to ensure that improvements have been done and the work has been approved. T4A will be conduit for processing invoices (at least quarterly) from state DOTs for payment. Someone will have to certify that the work has been done properly; this may be a third party for more complex projects.
- CSX has to grant permission for work to be done on their line. They are waiting for RTC modeling to be completed before any work can be done (probably in July). Project prioritization can be modified according to outcomes of the RTC modeling.
- The state DOTs will tell the SRC whether or not they are comfortable overseeing the project construction, and if they are not comfortable, there is money in the CRISI grant to hire a firm to oversee implementation.
- Commissioner Bennington moved to grant the Executive Committee permission to continue this conversation about fund and project administration outside the context of the meeting, and Commissioner Woodruff seconded.
- Mobile update
 - Mobile initially received federal matching funds to study the legacy station downtown, and that study will be finished this spring. Mobile now prefers a site at the airport; an Alternatives Analysis will have to be completed for the Brookley Field site. A pre-Alternatives Analysis will also be completed, identifying the criteria that should be analyzed in the Alternatives Analysis. The analysis will involve studying the difference in ridership/demand between the two sites. Brookley could apply for a station planning grant from the SRC; John Robert suggested issuing a Notice of Funding Opportunity to municipalities eligible for the planning grants.
 - Motion to issue Notice of Funding Opportunity on May 1, 2020 for SRC station planning grants. Commissioner Spain motioned, and Commissioner Bennington seconded.
- T4A has written nine pieces of legislation on the SRC's behalf. Some highlights include:
 - Expansion of CRISI funds to \$2 billion/year
 - Assessing abandoned and very lightly used freight right-of-ways
 - Creation of five additional commissions like the SRC, established by Congress with Governor-appointed members, with federal dollars to match annual contributions from the member states
 - Dedicated funding

- Time performance language, including tax incentives for freight rail to facilitate passenger service in a timely manner
 - Commissioner Spain suggested reaching out to the Association of Freight Railroads, CSX, and KCS and engaging them in the development of the language
 - Pedestrian and bike issues
 - There is no firm date set yet for the next round of CRISI grants that could be used for the NOLA to BR project.
- III. Financial and Administrative Report - *Knox Ross*
- Update on States Dues - *Knox Ross*
 - i. Have received Louisiana and Mississippi dues; Alabama is in process of getting theirs paid.
 - Approval of 2020 Budget - *Knox Ross*
 - i. Commissioner Bennington motioned to approve the 2020 budget, and Commissioner Woodruff seconded.
 - Approval of 2019 Audit - *Knox Ross*
 - i. Were no substantial issues with audit. T4A is addressing the small issues raised by the auditor about grant administration, as they are administering federal funds received by SRC.
 - ii. Commissioner Woodruff motioned to approve the audit, and Commissioner Bennington seconded.
- IV. Communications and Media Update - *Joni Emmons and Dan Dealy*
- Joni reported on CPEX's work producing advocacy documents for the Executive Committee's recent trip to Capitol Hill. They also worked with Jacksonville State University and Commissioner Bennington to produce a one-page Executive Summary of the recent Economic Impact study on the expansion of passenger rail in Alabama. Joni also noted that CPEX can be a resource for crafting advocacy materials as the SRC moves forward on CRISI projects.
 - Dan noted the recent intensive efforts in Mobile to build support for Gulf Coast rail restoration and funding commitments.

Old Business

- I. Report on Executive Committee activities - *Spain, Ross, Blankenship*
- Commissioner Spain thanked the T4A team for developing legislative priorities for the SRC. He noted that the Executive Committee's time developing relationships in D.C. and with Amtrak has been worthwhile, and T4A has been instrumental in facilitating those relationships.
- II. Update on station planning grants - *John Robert Smith*
- The station planning grants are all complete; T4A will be working with the communities to give them the language their councils should pass to accept the award from the SRC.
- III. State Reports:
- a. Louisiana:
- i. Update on New Orleans to Baton Rouge passenger rail service

1. Governor was reelected and has reaffirmed his commitment to passenger rail in Louisiana from a transit and commuter perspective. Over the next four years, Commissioners Lapeyrolerie and Wilson will work to secure that future. Parish Presidents and Super Regional Authority have met to discuss federal funding and what Louisiana can do at the state level. New Orleans to Baton Rouge authorities and Monroe to Shreveport have been engaged in discussion on strategies the State can put forth on passenger rail. Fast-tracking some concepts to bring bus rapid transit (BRT) to the New Orleans airport. The Governor will have another conversation with Baton Rouge to New Orleans about specifics of using CRISI and other tools for advancing passenger rail.
- b. Mississippi:
- i. Update – *Knox Ross*
 1. Joe McHugh suggested setting up meetings with the newly-elected Mississippi Transportation Commissioners. Both were very engaged and supportive of the SRC's efforts in Mississippi and along the Gulf Coast. They were also able to meet with key legislators to build support for the SRC's work.
 2. The Station Area Grants are all moving forward, and managers have confirmed that projects are moving forward. The Mayor of Biloxi made the train the center of his State of the City address.
 3. Mississippi's passenger rail advocates were very involved and supportive when the Mobile City Council was debating their support. He noted that the time spent educating people about passenger rail activities has paid off. Commissioner Ross also recognized Commissioner Kell for her decades of service and advocacy.
- c. Alabama:
- i. Approval of Gulf Coast Passenger Service by City of Mobile - *Wiley Blankenship*
 1. The State of Alabama should be submitting payment of dues soon.
 2. Commissioner Blankenship thanked Mississippi and Louisiana for their continued support of the state of Alabama. Instead of securing committed support from the state government as the other two states have, Alabama has chosen to get support from local government. The effort to get a commitment of matching funds for the first three years of operating expenses from the Mobile City Council was successful, and he thanked Dan, T4A, and Amtrak for their advocacy efforts.
 3. Next, Alabama commissioners will meet with the County and ask for their support for the necessary infrastructure improvements. Conversations with the Governor's office for money for the station are ongoing.
 4. The Master Plan for the Mobile Air Authority should be available in the fall, and then we will know more about the position of passenger rail at Brookley Field Airport.
 - ii. JSU Study – *Toby Bennington*
 1. The study was conducted by Jennifer Green at Jacksonville State University and presented at the last meeting. She worked with CPEX to produce a one-

page executive summary. Commissioner Bennington anticipates that it will be used as an educational tool.

New Business

Reports from Amtrak - *Todd Stennis and Marc Magliari*

- The new Amtrak CEO, William Flynn from Atlas Air, will start on April 15.
- Several ADA station projects will be going on in Mississippi over the next 24 months.
- Work on the RTC (Rail Traffic Control) model has begun. Amtrak is expecting model completion in August. The model is a starting point for negotiations with the host railroad; it tells how to optimize passenger service along the route. A service agreement will come later, and it will dictate when service starts, when capacity improvements are necessary, and other service details.
- Marc noted that bookings have been affected by COVID-19; the volume of ridership is going down.
- Amtrak has filed its annual request for funding, and it includes funds to maintain the current network and \$300 million for growing corridors. They are requesting that funds be allocated for states interested in initiating new passenger service.

SCHEDULE OF UPCOMING MEETINGS:

- I. June 5, 2020 Alabama
- II. September 11, 2020 Mississippi
- III. December 4, 2020 Louisiana

ADJOURNMENT