

# **Meeting of the Southern Rail Commission**

June 4, 2021 9:00am-12:00pm  
Estuary at the Water Campus & Zoom

**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,

## **In-Person Attendees:**

Phil Jones (LA DOTD), Mayor Adrian Perkins (Shreveport Mayor), Dinero Washington (SporTran), Bryan Jones (HNTB), Chris Hester (APSC), Todd Stennis (Amtrak), Maggie Woodruff (NO Regional Planning Commission), Greg White, Sandra Riggs, Lauren Jumonville (BRAAF), Sara Gardner (BRAAF), Jared Falcon, (BRAAF), Meagan Collman (Emergent Method)

## **Zoom Attendees:**

Shawn Wilson (LA DOTD), John Robert Smith (T4America), Dennis Barrett (T4America), Marc Magliari (Amtrak), Amit Bose (Federal Railroad Administration), Shawn Wilson (DOTD), David Handera (Amtrak), Elaine Clegg (City of Boise), William Cotter (Hancock County Port & Harbor Commission), Peter Schwartz (Federal Railroad Administration), Emily Thogerson (Bottom Line), Jessie Fernandez-Gatti (FRA), Michael Lestingi (FRA), Doree Magiera (HDR Engineering, Inc.), Mary Perez (Sun Herald – McClatchy), Guy Busby (Alabama Public Radio), Russell Enfinger (Russell Enfinger, LLC), Darrel Saizan (Darrel Saizan and Associates, Inc.), Dan Dealy (DSD Services Group, LLC), Paul Worley (VP - Rail & Transit Practice Leader - US East), Conway Cristina (Manning, APC), Marc Dixon (FRA), Elizabeth Lawlor (Norfolk Southern Corporation), Julie Schneider (Trade Press Media), Diana Lopez (Federal Railroad Administration), Phillip Larroque, Vicki Rivers (BJCTA), Derek Chisholm (AECOM), Neal McMillin (Senator Wicker), Lynn Everett (FRA), Rebecca Ferguson (Port of Pensacola)

**Pledge of Allegiance and Prayer - Knox Ross**

## **Recognition of Special Guests**

### **REGULAR BUSINESS:**

- I. Approval of the minutes from the meeting of March 5, 2021
  - a. Commissioner McNair moved to approve the minutes, and Commissioner Woodruff seconded the motion – motion passes.
  
- II. Financial and Administrative Report - *Knox Ross*
  - a. COVID reduced SRC's expenses a great deal, primarily due to not hosting in-person meetings.
  - b. SRC's expenses for T4's work in Washington has proven to be effective.
  - c. SRC is likely going to have legislation pass this session that will lead to more multistate commissions similar to SRC.
  - d. This is important because it will lead to matching federal funds, which would double the SRC's budget at a critical time.
  - e. Commissioner Ross noted that all states are current on payments.
  - f. Commissioner Bennington moved to approve the financials, and Commissioner Leger seconded – motion passes.
  
- III. Communications and Media Update - *Meagan Collman*
  - a. SRC has received a lot of shows of support over the last few months in the media.

- b. Website has been updated with recent media coverage, press releases and blog posts, and stakeholders are encouraged to stay up to date.
- c. Emergent Method has been managing social media since March – primarily Facebook – and in May, ran a promotion to increase website visits resulting in new followers which was a good return on investment.
- d. Commissioners are encouraged to suggest post ideas for engagement.
- e. Commissioner Leger posed question of considering Instagram for social media presence.

**IV. Legislative Affairs Update - *John Robert Smith and Dennis Barrett, T4 America***

- a. President Biden's FY22 Budget Request
  - i. President Biden's Fiscal Year 2022 (FY22) budget request provides around \$1.5 trillion of which:
    - 1. The request provides \$4 billion for rail.
      - a. \$2.7 billion for Amtrak specifically
        - i. \$1.4 billion for the National Network
        - ii. \$1.3 billion for the Northeast Corridor
      - b. \$375 million for Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvement (CRISI) grants
      - c. \$625 million for PRIME, a new passenger rail competitive grant program to invest in passenger rail.
        - i. Operating support covered
        - ii. Will go to passenger amenity grants
- b. President Biden's American Jobs Plan
  - i. President Biden's American Jobs Plan is the president's infrastructure proposal that provides \$2 trillion over eight years.
    - 1. The plan includes \$80 billion for passenger and freight rail service.
      - a. \$39 billion for the Northeast Corridor
      - b. \$20 billion to improve and expand intercity passenger rail
      - c. \$16 billion for the National Network
      - d. \$5 billion in safety grants
- c. Surface Transportation Reauthorization (Senate) – *Dennis Barrett*
  - i. Senate: Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (NY) has expressed the desire for all reauthorization bills to be on the house floor by the July 4 recess.
    - 1. The environment public works bill came out a couple of weeks ago with bipartisan approval.
    - 2. The committees and their jurisdictions are:
      - a. Commerce Committee: Rail
        - i. This bill is expected to be marked up in committee the week of June 7
      - b. Banking and Finance Committee: Transit
      - c. Committee on Environment and Public Works (EPW): Roads and Highways
        - i. This bill was passed out of Committee on May 26
- d. Surface Transportation Reauthorization Act (STRA) – *John Robert Smith*
  - i. On May 22nd, Senator Tom Carper (DE), Chairman of the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works (EPW); Shelley Moore Capito (WV), the Committee's Ranking Member; Ben Cardin (MD), Chairman of the EPW Subcommittee on Transportation Infrastructure; and Kevin Cramer (ND), the Subcommittee's Ranking Member introduced the Surface Transportation Reauthorization Act of 2021 (STRA).
  - ii. STRA was unanimously passed out of the EPW committee on May 26.
  - iii. This is the highway title of the surface transportation reauthorization that is set to expire in September.

- iv. Included the removal of the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) cap for rail projects that was initially only given to Maine. Sen. Wicker (MS) was instrumental in achieving the removal.
  - 1. Maine was formerly the only state allowed to use CMAQ funds to operate rail funds beyond freight, so request was made for cap to be removed.
  - 2. CMAT funds will be allowed to operate passenger rail and transit.
    - a. States will have the ability to use funds for operating costs that will not come out of other funds
  - v. Bill authorizes \$32 billion in spending for passenger rails and creates new grant program.
  - vi. Regardless of expansions, PRIME will be the place you go with the 90% federal share.
  - vii. CRISI is not used for rail projects because funds are too cumbersome; unfavorable for private sector because of credit risk premium.
  - viii. PRIME is much more user-friendly working with private sectors to secure funding.
    - 1. Does not involve increasing match
  - ix. Food and beverage can be offered as an amenity.
    - 1. Required food service to be accessible to all passengers, not just those using sleeper cars
  - x. Another important addition is that a percentage of all Amtrak allocation must be dedicated to enhancing the experience of passengers.
- e. Surface Transportation Reauthorization
  - i. **House:** The Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure will reintroduce a similar version of the INVEST Act that was passed in the House last Congress.
  - ii. Legislative text is expected to be introduced on June 4th with markup beginning the week of June 7<sup>th</sup>.
  - iii. This bill will include the Interstate Rail Compacts Advancement Act of 2021.
    - 1. Compacts, modeled after SRC, will be awarded up to \$500,000 per year for operations.
    - 2. Dollar for dollar match in whatever states put up for federal funding toward these commissions.
      - a. Senate bill to come soon
    - 3. There are organizations and members of congress who have advocated for this cause and never gotten this far with this kind of bill.
    - 4. The work done by the SRC has been instrumental in getting this legislation passed.
    - 5. Commissioners are getting the very first reading of the passenger rail title within the T&I bill
    - 6. Bill is expected to pass in the house, then will come out of the Senate Commerce Committee, reflecting a lot of the same language.
- f. Virtual Hill Meetings
  - i. The Southern Rail Commission, represented by John Spain (LA) and Knox Ross (MS) held remote meetings with Congresswoman Julia Letlow (LA) and Congressman Michael Guest (MS), Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Member.
  - ii. We are in the process of setting up a meeting with Congressman Troy Carter (LA) who has been selected to serve on Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Members.

## OLD BUSINESS:

- I. Report on Executive Committee activities - *Spain, Ross, Blankenship*
  - a. I-20 Report – *Knox Ross*
    - i. I-20 would split Crescent at Meridian and take section to Fort Worth, TX.
    - ii. A few years ago, Amtrak conducted a study showing that this train covered the cost to operate in every iteration.

- iii. Amtrak did not include this in the 2035 plan, but we will continue to push for its development.
  - iv. Resolutions from Louisiana Legislature asking DOTD to more formally study this route and our congressmen are supportive, the Ruston mayor is supportive.
  - v. Ross acknowledged Shreveport Mayor Adrian Perkins who is in attendance expressing interest in this project.
  - vi. Ross's bottom line is that while I-20 may not be at the top of the want list for Amtrak, it is at the top of the list for north Louisiana and central Mississippi.
  - vii. Urged that as a commission and as elected officials, we must push for this and ask the questions so that Amtrak knows this is important to the region because on the Amtrak map, this is a hole that needs to be filled.
  - viii. There is a real opportunity to connect Baton Rouge and New Orleans, Baton Rouge and Shreveport, along the line of I-20; a lot of things are coming together that make this a real opportunity.
  - ix. It works, it makes sense, it is an economic driver for all of us, so we need the local push from our leaders.
- b. Remarks from Shreveport Mayor Adrian Perkins
    - i. This an initiative supported by his administration.
    - ii. Introduced Mr. Washington who oversees transportation for Shreveport.
    - iii. Shreveport leaders see the importance of bringing passenger rail to connect to Dallas, Atlanta, larger hub cities.
    - iv. Perkins has met with Amtrak and stakeholders, including KCS, and has been continuously pushing to make sure everyone stays aligned.
  - c. KCS Merger – *John Spain*
    - i. This is an important point in time for the work we have been doing for some time.
    - ii. STB will make the final determination on the acquisition of KCS.
    - iii. In the scenario where CN is able to purchase KCS, the merger is very important for Louisiana in particular because it presents two largely parallel train routes one of which could potentially be freed up for passenger rail operations.
    - iv. KCS acquisition creates opportunity for honest discussion and partnership with freight connecting Baton Rouge and New Orleans.
    - v. Having access to multiple routes is extremely important and at this point in time, the possibility exists but we have a long way to go.
    - vi. Small regional airlines have tried to connect North and South Louisiana but have failed.
    - vii. For Louisiana, we are the point in time where we can see bringing passenger rail in three different locations, presenting a great opportunity for economic development.
    - viii. Renee Lapeyrolerie: We are doing our due diligence on all opportunities before us.

## II. State Reports

- a. Louisiana
  - i. Spain confirmed that Congresswoman Letlow was briefed on I-20 project and is interested in bringing passenger rail back to north Louisiana; other members of Louisiana's congressional delegation have also expressed they are in favor of SRC's mission.
- b. Mississippi
  - i. Knox confirmed that they have been having good meetings with congressional leaders who have been very open to SRC requests and learning more about SRC's work.
- c. Alabama
  - i. Alabama commissioners have been holding monthly meetings to keep work aligned; these meetings are going well.

## NEW BUSINESS:

- i. Reports from Amtrak - *Todd Stennis and Marc Magliari*

- a. Amtrak is planning for the restoration of daily service along the Gulf Coast and is underway with installing ADA compliant platforms in all three states – AL, MS, LA.
- b. Amtrak’s 2035 Corridor Vision is a vision for new development and does not mean projects such as I-20 are off the table.
- c. McComb, MS tragically lost their train station due to arson and Amtrak is hoping to fundraise for restoration.
- d. Dr. David Handera expressed his excitement for where Amtrak is today and where they are headed in the southern region.
- e. Amtrak is working closely with the FRA to get through phase one and phase two of plans for station platform reconstruction.
  - 1. Phase one includes installing temporary platforms, which will be fully accessible, and phase two will be full reconstruction of the platforms.

**II.** Announcing Station Grants Update– *John Robert Smith*

- a. The SRC is reviewing proposed award amendments and new requests and anticipates announcing awards in the coming weeks.

**III.** Remarks by Neal McMillan, Senator Wicker’s office

- a. John Robert Smith introduced Neal McMillan, legislative aid for Senator Wicker
- b. McMillan stated that restoring passenger rail to the Gulf Coast has the full green light all the time in Wicker’s office.
- c. The Gulf Coast is not only a legacy item for Wicker, but also a way to make the future service better and more reliable than what it used to be.
- d. The Gulf Coast is growing and thriving, providing service would be justified and will continue to grow in importance.

**IV.** Presentation by Amit Bose, FRA Interim Administrator

- a. Bose spoke with the board earlier this year and the SRC mission is at the top of his and Secretary Buttigieg’s list; they are all in favor of restoring service for the Gulf Coast.
- b. Bose emphasized the projects the SRC is working on align with President Biden’s vision who is taking unprecedented steps to transform our nation’s infrastructure.
- c. The American Jobs Plan will invest in rail projects, not only replacing infrastructure, but also maintain what we have and extend beyond to create jobs and promote economic growth at the same time.
- d. President Biden is calling for a second great railroad evolution and intends to double federal funding of all public transit in safe, efficient and climate friendly projects.
- e. To achieve these goals, congressional support and strong partnerships are important.
- f. PRIME Act will be primary investment vehicle to modernize and extend existing corridors and develop new corridors for service.
- g. This Administration recognizes the important role in states coming together and we have an exciting journey ahead of us to support passenger rail expansion in this country.
- h. Bose indicated that decades ago, freight railroad had responsibility to deliver passenger rail service; as part of the deal they made to relieve themselves of this obligation, they agreed that Amtrak would have rights to operate service over shared tracks – this is law.
- i. The Service Transportation Board has set up a passenger rail working group that the FRA is staying in close contact with.
- j. Bose affirmed that the FRA wants to ensure there is consistent and dedicated funding available at the federal level for the formation of new rail commission groups.
- k. The FRA believes that interstate rail compacts, using SRC has a model, can deliver results and hold tremendous promise in advancing intercity passenger rail development.
- l. The FRA supports adding incentives for compacts and funding for their ongoing operations.
- m. Bose concluded his time with the commissioners by reaffirming that the Gulf Coast service has the attention of the secretary and is one of his top priorities.

**SCHEDULE OF UPCOMING MEETING:**

- I. September 10, 2021 Mississippi
- II. December 3, 2021 Alabama
- III. March 4, 2022 Louisiana

**ADJOURNMENT**