

Meeting of the Southern Rail Commission

September 11, 2020 9:00am-12:00pm

Bay St. Louis, Mississippi

Call to Order: *Chairman Wiley Blankenship*

Roll Call

Attendees: John Spain, Kay Kell, Knox Ross, Wiley Blankenship, Renee Lapeyrolerie, Roy Woodruff, Toby Bennington (by phone), Stephen McNair, Steven Brom, David Clark – by phone

Guests: John Robert Smith (Transportation for America), Phil Jones (LA Multimodal Commerce), Dean Goodell (LA Multimodal Commerce), Rachel DiResto, Maggie Woodruff (Regional Planning Commission), Todd Stennis (Amtrak), Michael Monsour, Larry Smith (BSL Council Member, Ward 4), Jeffery Reed (BSL Councilman, Ward 3), Frank Martin (BJCTA), Vicki Rivers (BJCTA), Sissy Gonzales, Dana Furnston, BSL Mayor Mike Favre, Matt Anderson, Brad Christenson

By Phone: Andrew Justus (Transportation for America), Dan Dealy, Greg White (Covington County Commission), Janice Hamilton (Alabama Public Service Commission)

REGULAR BUSINESS:

I. Approval of the minutes from the meeting of June 5, 2020

A. Commissioner Spain motioned to approve the minutes, and Commissioner Woodruff seconded.

II. Update on Station Planning Grants - *John Robert Smith and Andrew Justus*

A. Mississippi-Birmingham Station Grants

1. All cities participated on a call with FRA and Amtrak and received clarification of what is required for their projects. They also received information on the available resources and technical assistance from Amtrak regarding design specifications and written narratives.
2. Some cities have held one-on-one calls with Amtrak to further explore how Amtrak can assist their work at all stages, including availability for kickoff calls once engineering consultants are hired. Other cities will hold similar calls when they are ready.
3. Amtrak has been a big help in this process which will potentially streamline approvals going forward.

B. North Rail Connector

1. T4America has been in close contact with the Port of Pascagoula and Mississippi DOT about their plans.
2. Following earlier soil samples, project managers will submit an amendment request to the Army Corps of Engineers to alter the project's earthen causeway to a trestle. This is due to deeper than expected unstable soil, which would increase the amount of needed fill. The trestle alternative will be less expensive than fill in this scenario, and feature reduced environmental impact. The project managers expect the change to be approved.

III. Legislative Affairs Update - *John Robert Smith and Andrew Justus*

A. COVID has had a devastating impact on all forms of public transportation. CARES Act funding provided some assistance for sustaining Amtrak staffing.

B. Amtrak has submitted a supplemental request requesting an additional \$1.45 billion while also proposing to furlough about 3,700 jobs and reducing services on the long-distance rail network from 7

days a week to 3 days a week. Transportation for America expressed that this proposal will be extremely detrimental to Amtrak's overall finances, especially when the long-distance trains provide 60% of Amtrak's incoming revenue.

- C. These cost cutting measures, which were not supported by Congress, are proposed to take place in early October.
- D. Transportation for America has been working with Congressional leaders and other state officials to form interstate compacts similar to the SRC. Montana, Idaho, Washington, West Virginia and Ohio have all expressed interest and are in active discussions with T4 and Senator Wicker.
- E. John Robert played the video from Senator Tester about the importance of the Empire Builder line as the gateway to the west to stimulate small town economies and connect the state.
- F. Senators Tester, Wicker, and Mansion (in WVA) are united in their support of long-distance services and they also support the gulf coast rail project.
- G. Formation of these new independent authorities could result in the creation of a strong passenger rail caucus in Congress with 25 states united on passenger rail priorities, ability to draw federal funds and create impactful legislation.
- H. John Robert said there are currently open seats on the Amtrak board, but they will most likely not be filled until a new president is elected after November.

IV. Financial and Administrative Report - Knox Ross

- A. All of the states' dues have been paid; LA has pre-paid for next year. The SRC has collected the reimbursement money from the FRA and has paid back the money borrowed from the reserve to pay bills.
- B. Other federal matching dollars may be available in the future which could increase the overall budget for the SRC. Commissioner Spain motioned to approve the financial report, and Commissioner McNair seconded.

V. Communications and Media Update – Rachel DiResto

- A. Commissioner Spain reported that Emergent Method is now under contract with the SRC to support communications needs.
- B. Rachel reported that the SRC website has been refreshed with many of the pages revised to organize the content for better ease of access.
- C. The website homepage now has a blog post section to feature SRC project related updates, and a new article on passenger rail safety was recently posted.
- D. The work on the website is still in progress, and Commissioners were encouraged to submit ideas for updates or reach out with other requests.

NEW BUSINESS:

I. Report from Amtrak: Todd Stennis

- A. Mr. Stennis reported that Amtrak is working with CSX and HDR on the RTC model to look at Norfolk Southern's track. The report will be completed in December, and then it will be determined how to work with CSX on other improvement details.
- B. The report is using the preferred model that SRC asked for, which includes better connections for job markets in each state. The model includes 2 round trips morning and evening, one out of Mobile, and one out of New Orleans. Other schedules will also be evaluated, and Amtrak will look at comparative options as well.
- C. This commission was awarded \$33 million to this project, funds which are now matched by local funding from the 3 states.

- D. Todd reported that on Sept 23 a ribbon cutting is scheduled for the Picayune Station for their new platform. This 400 ft ADA platform with lighting adds value to the service in Picayune and demonstrates the opportunity for improvements of other stations along the route.
- E. Todd also announced that on October 1, Amtrak's national network will be changing service due to COVID, with reductions to tri-weekly service on City of New Orleans and Crescent routes with plans of returning to daily service by summer of 2021.

II. Report on Bay St. Louis Depot Area Plans - Councilman Larry Smith and Councilman Jeffery Reed

- A. The Councilmen presented the renderings for station/depot area improvements around the Bay St. Louis depot building.
- B. Bay St. Louis received BP funding for depot which has spurred additional economic development and private investment over \$2 million on Blaize Avenue, with new plans for restaurants and condos.
- C. In the depot area, there are plans for a new playground for events, a pavilion, an open-air stage, screen, lighting and sound. This will be a year-round amenity for the area that groups, such as the local theatre group, can activate. Keller street will be closed to add green space and a gazebo with a stage for gathering. Other improvements include new parking, new trees, ADA restrooms, golf cart paths, improved lighting and signage.
- D. The "Cruising the Coast" event, motor cart corporate event has committed to hold their upcoming event nearby.
- E. The staff working on this project was recognized and thanked for their efforts.
- F. SRC Commissioners encouraged the City of Bay St. Louis to apply for CRISI funds in 2021 which require a 50% match but could be used for further station enhancements.
- G. SRC currently has grant funds available, so Commissioners also encouraged Birmingham to amend their grant request for additional funds.

OLD BUSINESS:

I. State Reports

- A. Louisiana:
 - 1. Louisiana has two vacancies on the Commission with possible appointments to be named soon.
 - 2. Phil Jones from LA DOTD announced that legislation was recently passed that included a state rail program with funds dedicated to short line railroads in LA.
- B. Mississippi:
 - 1. Knox said all of the station area grantees are making progress.
- C. Alabama:
 - 1. Commissioner Blankenship welcomed Steven Brom as the new Governor's designee from Birmingham.
 - 2. Commissioner Bennington noted that prior to COVID, Tuscaloosa, Birmingham, and Anniston had been working together to set up meetings to share the findings of the economic impact data from Jacksonville State University. They will be meeting with the Mayor soon to give him a briefing. Former commissioner Larry Watts is also helping to connect to other mayors.
 - 3. Commissioner McNair reported that the Mobile master plan for the airport, which was supported by a \$150,000 grant from SRC for station design, will still be able to use funds for the new station location
 - 4. The site selection process will be finalized soon, and FAA should approve the master plan in the next 60-90 days.
 - 5. AECOM will issue the final report on the Birmingham/Mobile study by the end of the year.

6. Commissioners met with the new port director yesterday, and he is not opposed to passenger rail. His concerns are interference north/south to port, and our project doesn't interfere with that. The Port is awaiting the final HDR study before they make any financial investment.
7. Commissioners are requesting \$2.2 million from the Mobile Council over a 3-year period to match SRC's federal money, and funds are still in place with signed agreement with progress underway.

NEW BUSINESS:

I. Report on Executive Committee Trip to WASHDOT - *John Spain*

- A. Members of the Executive Committee including Wiley Blakenship, John Spain, Knox Ross and Shawn Wilson from LA DOTD travelled from Hammond to Chicago to Washington State to view Talgo train equipment. The Talgo trains have been considered for use for the Gulf Coast route, but they are not compatible with current Amtrak equipment.
- B. Commissioners stated that the transitions between New Orleans and Chicago, on to Washington State work very well. Ridership was high with people using trains for necessary transportation.
- C. Commissioners also met with Amtrak leaders on the trip and viewed upgraded Amtrak cars that present an alternative at a decent price. The observation cars on the Amtrak trains are desirable and would be popular for the Gulf Coast route.
- D. Federal dollars can be used to purchase rolling stock, or this cost can be included as part of Amtrak's operating cost.

- II. Representatives from BJCTA, Frank Martin and Vicky Rivers, expressed their interest in participating in SRC efforts. BJCTA has visions for including all modes of transportation, and hopes to attract more people to Birmingham by improving walkability and offering multi-modal options. SRC Commissioners encouraged them to use SRC as a resource.

SCHEDULE OF UPCOMING MEETINGS:

- I. December 4, 2020 – Louisiana (tentatively in New Orleans pending COVID 19 restrictions)

ADJOURNMENT