

SOUTHERN RAIL COMMISSION FULL COMMISSION MEETING

Friday, September 11, 2015

9:00am-12:00pm

Royal Sonesta Hotel - New Orleans, LA

Attending: Knox Ross, John Spain, Greg White, Larry Watts, Kay Kell, Brent Warr, Ashley Edwards, Jack Norris, Patrick Sullivan, Blake Wilson, Roy Woodruff, Steve Carter, Walt Leger, Phil Jones

Others: Amber Cefalu, Dan Dealy, Rachel DiResto, Tim Basilica, Atri Sen, John Robert Smith, Todd Stennis, Tommy McDonald, Wiley Blankenship, Brenda Simkins, Mayor Connie Moran (Ocean Springs, MS), Bob Johnson (trains magazine), Karen Parsons, Allison Fultz, Leslie & Robert Hines, Michelle Nailor-Octave, Kristin Gisleson Palmer, Hunter Arnold, Freddy Jackson, Sharon Balfour, Jerry Gehman, Adam Quatar (Houma RPC), Fred Jackson

Commissioners Not in Attendance: Angelia Mance, Claire Austin, J.W. Billy McFarland, Natalie Laborde, Toby Bennington, Michael Jackson

I. Full Commission Meeting

1. Chairman Ross welcomed everyone and led the Pledge of Allegiance.
2. Chairman Ross recognized new MS Commissioners: Ashley Edwards, Jack Norris, Patrick Sullivan, Blake Wilson.

II. Old Business

1. Phil Jones moved to approve the minutes of the June 5, 2015 meeting, Steve Carter seconded and the motion carried with no objections.

III. New Business

1. Chairman Ross stated that the Amtrak Study on restoration of passenger service east of New Orleans has not been completed, but the commission has signed a contract with Amtrak to look at routes east of New Orleans.
2. Presentation by Bob Johnson with TRAINS Magazine- The recent article that appeared in Trains Magazine features the history of the New Orleans to Jacksonville passenger rail service and the possibility of restoring the service. A pdf and access to photo gallery can be made available to commissioners on request.
3. Presentation of Gubernatorial Briefing book on the New Orleans to Baton Rouge passenger rail service- John Spain
 - A. At its Spring meeting, the Commission authorized using Louisiana funds to produce a gubernatorial briefing book for candidates running for Governor in Louisiana to understand the critical next steps in starting passenger rail service between New Orleans and

Baton Rouge. The report was produced by Transportation for America and CPEX and will be sent to candidates and other elected officials in September.

- B. At a recent Gubernatorial forum, all four candidates expressed support for the proposed passenger service, but had questions about how it will be funded.
- C. The report details the next steps, gives background data from previous studies, examples from other states and will be helpful to keep this project in the election discussion over the next two months.

4. John Spain gave an update on activities related to the New Orleans-Baton Rouge Rail project.

- A. Knox Ross will speak on behalf of SRC at a Press Conference in Gonzales on Sept 16, 2015 on the site that the City of Gonzales acquired for their train station. There is a high level of cooperation among regional leaders represented by the LA Super Region Rail Authority.
- B. Louisiana Congressman Garret Graves has requested a meeting with officials from Kansas City Southern, the host railroad from New Orleans to Baton Rouge to discuss the proposed passenger service.

5. T4A Report: update on Federal Transportation Bill and other issues-John Robert Smith, T4A

- A. The commission has become a significant force in Washington as the advocate for passenger rail service in the Gulf States and in state capitols, which is a real change for the commission.
- B. The SRC was named specifically in the House bill and the senate version of the rail reauthorization – RREEA – uses the same language that creates a Gulf Coast Working Group with SRC having a seat. The Senate appropriations bill by Cochran also includes this language.
- C. T4A has created a national working group on passenger rail so that these efforts can be sustained. T4A asked for partners to sign letters of support and secured 106 signatures by leaders across the nation. These were sent to the Senate and House leadership including members of the House T&I Committee. The House is currently working on the Surface Transportation Bill which will be introduced in early September with the goal with

the goal of passing it by the end of September, although that timeframe may be pushed back. T4A hopes to write in specific language for “six new state supported routes” with operating support on a declining scale to get services up and going.

- D. 4A will be meeting with the T&I subcommittee on rail.
 - E. T4A also met with Congressman Graves who expressed support for rail, and talked about the need to have key employers involved in the discussion at the discussion in regional planning efforts.
 - F. In the next weeks, Sarah Feinberg’s confirmation comes before the committee. She is currently acting administrator of FRA.
 - G. SRC has made a number of official DC visits which have resulted in specific legislation.
6. Dan Dealy and Chairman Ross gave a report on the 10th Anniversary of Hurricane Katrina Forum
- A. Dan, Kay, and Connie were very helpful at the K10 event hosted last month in Mississippi. The Commission presented on a panel about the return of rail along the coast, which was part of a series of official events in Mississippi over the summer. There were 110 people in attendance who were interested in economic development opportunities along the coast. Resilience was the theme. Senator Wicker’s staff came and the event received good media coverage.
 - B. Dan Dealy emphasized the importance of getting the SRC’s message out to the public.
 - C. SRC is working to coordinate an upcoming rail inspection train doing work along the coast east of New Orleans to include media coverage and engage local leaders to highlight support along the route. Hopefully the FRA administrator will participate and the hope is to bring federal, state and local officials together when that train comes through each community.
7. Discussion of Federal Transportation funding for regional grant making
- A. Chairman Ross explained that the commission has \$2.5m in FRA earmarks and is working with the FRA to confirm that funds are still available. The funds require a 50% local match.
 - B. SRC has previously voted to set aside \$1 million dollars of the earmark funds to use on the proposed Baton Rouge to New Orleans passenger rail service. The funds must be used for

improvements to rail lines on the designated High Speed Rail Corridor. The remaining funds would be used by AL and MS.

- C. SRC is asking Mississippi Senator Cochran to give guidance to determine if funds can be used by the commission to create a grant program for station improvements. The commission hopes to have an answer next week.
- D. Cities along the gulf coast are interested in using these funds and the commission is working with CPEX to prepare program documents and invitations to submit applications for proposals, and to determine how to administer a grant program.
- E. Louisiana will need to work with next governor to ensure flexibility in the way funds can be used. Since the freight railroad may ask for a new capacity study, SRC may need to grant funds a portion of their funds to the Louisiana Super Rail Authority to partner with the railroads for a future study.
- F. Although there is not a set deadline for using the funds, a sense of urgency is needed. The funds are available to use until the Senate rescinds them, but the commission should try to obligate the funds fund by this fall.
- G. Projects will not be determined by each state. Instead cities who wish to apply could file an application with the commission. The commission will then review the applications and will oversee the projects to insure that they comply with the grant requirements. Criteria will be set by the SRC and approved by the FRA.
- H. Walt Leger made a motion to give the Executive Committee authority to develop the final language and process to utilize the funds, seconded by Greg White – the motion was passed unanimously.

8. Approve of the hiring of a firm to handle the Commissions financial transactions

- A. Chairman Ross explained that SRC has previously utilized the Southeast Alabama regional Planning Commission's services for financial accounting. They requested to end their agreement and Greg White has been handling accounting for the commission for the last 2 months.
- B. The commission solicited proposals and received a very reasonable quote to do this financial work including expenses reports. Although three proposals were received, this is only one that submitted costs and has been verified as a reputable CPA

firm. They proposed a monthly contract, with no obligations and estimated the cost of \$4600 annually. If the commission receives the federal earmark funds, a different level of service will be needed. The annual audit is conducted by another firm.

C. Greg White moved approval of the proposal, seconded by Walt Leger. The motion was passed unanimously.

9. Discussion of SRC participation in the Smart Growth Conference in Baton Rouge, November 3rd - 4th

A. Secretary Spain explained that the commission has an opportunity to sponsor a panel featuring the progress of the SRC at the upcoming Smart Growth conference hosted by CPEX in Baton Rouge in November. US DOT Secretary Anthony Foxx is the keynote speaker on Nov 4th and commissioners will have the opportunity to interact with him before and after his panel.

B. The sponsorship would come with 8 free registrations for commissioners..

C. Commissioner Kell moved approval for \$2500 for a sponsorship of the Summit, and it was seconded by Commissioner Woodruff. The motion was passed unanimously.

10. Annual Dues Payments: Commissioner Carter moved to send out dues invoices to each state in the amount of at \$60K,. Commissioner Leger seconded. The motion was passed unanimously.

11. Discussion of Technical Advisory Committee for Commission Projects

A. Chairman Ross said the SRC should consider forming a Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) if a grant program for capital improvements is developed. The TAC would include outside experts from each state delegation who can be advisors, resources, such as staff of regional planning commissions or MPOs.

B. The Commission would reimburse expenses for this committee to meet.

C. Although there is no formal action proposed today, it will be on the next meeting agenda for discussion.

12. Update of Disposal and Permanent Storage of Commission Records. Chair

A. Commissioners Ross and White went to Tuscaloosa and cleaned out the commission's rented storage unit. After determining that many of the records had been digitized and are stored as

electronic files, the old files and paperwork were disposed of. Some remaining records are now stored in Commissioner Ross's office. The commission voted to have the remaining records scanned and turned in to electronic files as needed and posted on the commissions website..

13. Election of Officers

- a. Commissioner Leger nominated Greg White as Chair, seconded by Commissioner Spain.
- b. Commissioner Leger nominated John Spain as Vice Chair, seconded by Commissioner Carter.
- c. Commissioner Spain nominated Knox Ross as Secretary/Treasurer, seconded by Commissioner White

The commission unanimously voted approval.

14. Discussion of potential Commission memberships:

- A. The commission is considering becoming a member of the Southeast Tourism Society (STS). At the Biloxi meeting, the commission received a presentation from the STS, an organization that tourism in the southeast United States. The commission would designate a commissioner to attend meetings and represent the SRC. To determine if this is valuable, the commission approved funds to a designated commissioner to attend the next meeting of the STS to determine if the commission wants to become a member. The annual dues are estimated to be \$200. Commissioner Toby Bennington had previously expressed interest and will be asked if he would agree to represent the commission at the next STS meeting and report back to the commission on whether we should become a member. Not action was taken on the item to explore becoming a member of the Alabama League of Municipalities and it will be discussed at next meeting.

15. Update on Marketing and Website-Rachel Diresto-CPEX

- A. The website has been updated with recent news items including information on the new Mississippi Commissioners. A press release announcing new officers and Commissioners will be sent out next week.
- B. If commission members desire to have business cards, please contact CPEX..

16. Finance and Administration Report

- A. Commissioner White presented the monthly cost summary report.
- B. Commissioner Jones moved to approve the financials and the 2014 Audit Report, which was a clean audit. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Leger. The motion was passed unanimously.

IV. Miscellaneous

- A. There was a brief discussion about Positive Train Control which was discussed at SCORT– service may be stopped if railroads don't meet the deadline. John Robert Smith said the only railroad that will make the deadline is Amtrak; freight trains are most problematic. Congress is struggling with this now.
- B. An exhibit in Ocean Springs, Mississippi on passenger rail opens today featuring lots of artifacts. Commissioners are invited to check it out.

V. Next meetings:

- December 4, 2015 9:00am-12:00pm at The Battle House Renaissance Mobile Hotel & Spa 26 North Royal Street Mobile, AL 36602
- March 4, 2016 - Mississippi
- June 3, 2016 - Louisiana
- September 9, 2016 – Alabama
- December 9, 2016 - Mississippi

VI. Executive Session - Commissioner Ross makes a motion to go into Executive Session which was seconded by Commissioner Warr. The purpose of the Executive Session was to discuss matters of a sensitive nature related to studies being prepared by Amtrak that are currently underway.

VII. Returned to the general session and, taking no action on the topic of the Executive Session, the meeting was adjourned.