Dear Secretary Chao,

As Governor of the State of Louisiana, I am writing in strong support of restoring passenger rail service along the Gulf Coast. To achieve this important goal, the Southern Rail Commission (SRC) will be applying for FY17 Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) funding and FY17 Restoration and Enhancement (R&E) Grants Program funding. I support these applications and am pleased to partner with the states of Mississippi and Alabama to further the economic recovery of the Gulf coast region and improve the mobility of our residents along the Gulf coast. This letter is to inform you of the steps that the State of Louisiana is taking to restore rail service along the Gulf Coast and show support for SRC’s applications for FY17 CRISI and R&E funding. The Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development (LADOTD) under my directive is pledging a combination of federal and state funding to construct a new bypass around Gentilly Yard in New Orleans and advance other passenger rail service. Louisiana anticipates spending up to $8M in Community Development Block Grant funds to accomplish the above objectives. Thank you for your favorable consideration of this project and SRC’s grant applications.

As you may know, the Gulf Coast had passenger rail service from 1894 to 2005. However, because of the damage caused by Hurricane Katrina, the long distance Amtrak train between New Orleans, Louisiana and Orlando, Florida was suspended indefinitely. The Gulf region has gone without any passenger rail service since and its absence continues to hurt the communities once served.

The SRC is the only multi-state rail compact created by the U.S. Congress and since 1982, the SRC has worked to expand passenger rail service across the South, including restoring rail service along the Gulf coast. Restoring passenger rail service
The Gulf Coast congressional delegation created the Gulf Coast Working Group (GCWG) in 2005 to determine a path forward for passenger rail service in the region. The group included the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), Amtrak, the host railroad, the SRC, and elected officials and business leaders from the gulf coast. The GCWG final report, released on July 17, 2017, identified one service option as a daily business train, making two round trips a day, between New Orleans, Louisiana to Mobile, Alabama that links Mississippi coastal cities. The report identified the capital costs and operating costs to restore this level of service and potential sources of federal funding to cover the projected costs of restoration. The first segment that would be restored would be New Orleans to Mobile, with potential future segments to Baton Rouge, Louisiana and Atmore, Alabama. Several key capital improvements were identified as needed to implement a viable service. The States and local communities, along with the SRC have been working diligently to identify local funding sources necessary to secure the federal funding to restore this crucial service.

Restoring passenger rail service along the Gulf Coast would provide tremendous benefits to the citizens of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, particularly those who live and work in the region. This restored service will continue the economic recovery of communities devastated by Hurricane Katrina, enhance corridor mobility and safety, and allow for safer and more efficient hurricane evacuations by providing a daily passenger service that is business and tourism friendly.

The restored passenger rail service initially between New Orleans, LA and Mobile, AL would service six cities directly and over 30 communities indirectly along the 138-mile route. This service will provide jobs, economic development opportunities, improved connections for residents and additional travel options for tourists. For these reasons I strongly support restoring this service.

Therefore, LADOTD, under my directive, will use (up to) $8 million from previously allocated Community Development Block Grant funds for the recovery of New Orleans from Hurricane Katrina to build a bypass track around Gentilly Yard. The Gentilly Yard was one of the key constraints identified by the Gulf Coast Working Group to restoring passenger rail service along the Gulf Coast. The final GCWG report recommended construction of “a new, fully signaled bypass track around Gentilly Yard in New Orleans for passenger trains on the north side of the existing main line for approximately two miles.”¹ LADOTD will build this bypass track, thereby eliminating

¹ Gulf Coast Working Group Report Page 25
one of the main roadblocks to restoring service to Mobile and other destinations east of New Orleans.

Additionally, LADOTD will use programmed planning dollars to complete any environmental work, including requirements related to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), necessary to restore passenger rail service between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. Restarting passenger rail service between Baton Rouge and New Orleans has been a goal of the State of Louisiana since service ended in 1969 and the Baton Rouge-New Orleans corridor is a natural extension of the New Orleans to Mobile rail service that the SRC is currently working to get started.

LADOTD is now getting ready to conduct the environmental studies necessary to advance rail service between New Orleans and Baton Rouge and this letter signifies that commitment in writing.

Since the demise of passenger rail service because of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the State of Louisiana and its citizens have dreamed of a day with restored passenger service along the Gulf Coast. In pursuit of the dream, Louisiana is taking the steps outlined above under my leadership and supporting the SRC’s CRISI and R&E grant applications. Therefore, I humbly request your favorable consideration of this multi-state endeavor to bring back passenger rail service to the gulf coast.

Sincerely,

John Bel Edwards
Governor