



Contact: John Spain
Southern Rail Commission
(225) 387-6126
jspain@braf.org

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GULF COAST PASSENGER RAIL RECEIVES FEDERAL FUNDING New Orleans to Mobile Passenger Service Gets a Boost

BATON ROUGE, LA, June 7, 2019 — The Southern Rail Commission's efforts to restore passenger rail service to the Gulf Coast received a significant shot in the arm Friday with the long-awaited announcement of a \$33 million grant from the Federal Rail Administration (FRA). This federal grant will be matched with commitments from the state of Mississippi, the Mississippi Department of Transportation, the city of Mobile, Amtrak, and private partners, and is paired with priority investments from the state of Louisiana. Combined, this funding will be used to make the major infrastructure and capital investments required to allow Amtrak to move ahead with launching new, regular, reliable passenger service between New Orleans, LA and Mobile, AL.

The Southern Rail Commission (SRC), which applied for the grant from the federal Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) program, has been steadfastly committed to restoring the Gulf Coast passenger rail service that stopped nearly 14 years ago when Hurricane Katrina devastated rail infrastructure along the coast. This has been and continues to be a bipartisan effort of the Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama SRC commissioners, the populace of the states, Gov. Phil Bryant and Gov. John Bel Edwards, and Congress.

Chairman John Spain recognized Louisiana's investment in the project, noting that, "Governor John Bel Edwards, with strong support from DOTD Secretary Shawn Wilson, made the necessarily financial commitments for the infrastructure desperately needed in Louisiana to restore service. And we never would have been able to navigate these complex issues in Washington, DC without the policy guidance and hard work of our colleagues at Transportation for America."

Thanks to work from Senators Wicker and Cory Booker (NJ), Congress created the Gulf Coast Working Group in the 2015 federal transportation reauthorization (the FAST Act) to perform an exhaustive study on restoring the service, which was administered by the FRA. The FRA and the US Department of Transportation, including Secretary Elaine Chao, are to be praised for their work to advance this vital project.

Finally, Amtrak has also showed a consistent commitment to the project, providing an inspection train in 2016, working to minimize freight conflict, and contributing matching funds for the grant application. "Amtrak has strong state and local partners in Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana," said Amtrak President Richard H. Anderson. "The Mobile-New Orleans route exemplifies the type of short corridor service Amtrak wants to establish throughout the nation."

"As the inspection train rolled through scores of communities back in 2016, we were overwhelmed at the thousands of people who turned out in every stop to make it clear that they urgently want passenger rail service back in their communities," said **John Robert Smith**, chair of **Transportation for America**, former mayor of Meridian, MS and former chair of the board of Amtrak. "They understood that new rail service would be a win for the economy, for tourism, for local business, and for all of their residents who get a new affordable way to travel the region. We're hopeful that Congress also gets the clear message that they should be aiming to replicate this kind of story in other corridors all across the country as they maintain a vital national passenger rail network."

This new passenger rail will serve the coastal south in a more robust way than the old service ever did, stopping four times a day in New Orleans, Bay St. Louis, Gulfport, Biloxi, and Pascagoula with business-friendly, daytime service. It will link visitors, employees and state residents to Gulf casinos, military bases, historic sites, tourist attractions, and colleges. These capital investments will not only benefit passenger traffic, but freight as well, and the SRC is committed to supporting port access and circulation. According to the Trent Lott National Center for Excellence in Economic Development and Entrepreneurship at the University of Southern Mississippi, the passenger rail will generate \$282.58 million annually in the State of Mississippi, and will create 45 new full-time, permanent, high-wage train operating jobs in Louisiana. The impacts on tourism could be even more dramatic, as the study found that just a modest five percent increase in visitors in Harrison County (MS) could generate \$92 million more in spending and



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income annually. The SRC hopes Alabama will come to the table with matching funds for the next grant cycle so passenger rail can be extended to downtown Mobile.

The \$30 million grant from the FRA comes from the Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) Program.

Louisiana Governor, John Bel Edwards, stated, "In spite of the state's challenges with funding infrastructure, I am pleased that the US Department of Transportation shares our vision to connect the super-region by advancing this mobility solution. A small investment by the state is a seed that is being multiplied by our federal partners, Mississippi, and Alabama. It will produce benefits for Louisiana, our workforce, and the state's economy."

With these long-awaited grant funds awarded, the SRC, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Amtrak intend to move quickly and have trains running in 24 months, anticipating productive negotiations with CSX as Amtrak works with the private railroad to clear the way for space for passenger service. They'll do so with the support of a landmark Supreme Court decision made earlier this week that will allow the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) and Amtrak to finally set on-time performance standards and increase the reliability of passenger rail service.

Senator Wicker and his staff helped organize the inspection train in 2016 and worked for the past four years to get the CRISI funding. SRC thanks the late Senator Cochran for helping to get these grant programs funded, and Senators Shelby and Hyde-Smith for supporting the appropriations. The SRC further applauds the support of the congressional delegations from Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama for their support of Gulf Coast passenger rail. The SRC commissioners commend Transportation for America, Center for Planning Excellence, and DSD Services Group for helping to support this effort.

"The SRC encourages Members of Congress to continue to support and expand the CRISI and Restoration & Enhancement Grant programs for the benefit of our three States and the nation. These programs would support additional priorities including restoring passenger rail service between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, Meridian and Dallas Fort Worth, and Mobile, Montgomery, and Birmingham."

About the Southern Rail Commission

Created by Congress in 1982, the Southern Rail Commission (SRC) was designed to engage and inform public and private rail interests to support and influence Southeast rail initiatives. The SRC is led by governor-appointed commissioners from Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, and promotes the safe, reliable and efficient movement of people and goods to enhance economic development along rail corridors; provides transportation choices; and facilitates emergency evacuation routes.

About Transportation for America

Transportation for America is an alliance of elected, business, and civic leaders from communities across the country, united to ensure that states and the federal government step up to invest in smart, homegrown, locally-driven transportation solutions — because these are the investments that hold the key to our future economic prosperity. T4America is a program of Smart Growth America. www.t4america.org