

Meeting of the Southern Rail Commission

March 4, 2022, 9:00am-12:00pm

Estuary, The Water Campus, Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Call to Order: *Chairman Knox Ross*

Roll Call

SRC Commissioner Attendees in person:

John Spain, Brian Fulton, Frank Castiglia, Jerome Wall, Renee Lapeyrolerie, Stephen McNair

SRC Commissioner Attendees by phone:

Toby Bennington, John Clyde Riggs, Kay Kell, Knox Ross, Stephen Brom, David Clark

Other Attendees in person:

Ann Elise Kelly (JEDCO), Rachel DiResto, Karen Parsons (NO Regional Planning Commission), Dean Goodell (LA DOTD)

Other Attendees by Phone:

John Robert Smith (T4America), Dennis Barrett, Todd Stennis (Amtrak), John Robert, Bob Johnston, Marc Magliari

Pledge of Allegiance and Prayer

Recognition of New Commissioners and special guests

All new Mississippi commissioners were welcomed.

REGULAR BUSINESS:

- I. Approval of the minutes from the meeting of December 3, 2021 - *Knox Ross*
 - a. Commissioner Lapeyrolerie moved to approve the minutes, and Commissioner Bennington seconded the motion – motion passes.
 - b. Commissioner Castiglia abstains from voting since he was not yet an appointed Commissioner during that meeting timeframe.
- II. Financial and Administrative Report - *Knox Ross*
 - a. Copies of the 2021 audit were distributed. The audit is clean with no findings and the SRC will vote to accept it at a future date.
 - b. Financial statements from Jan 2022 indicate SRC has \$123K cash on hand.
 - c. “Future projects” category represents funds secured by Louisiana held for use on Louisiana rail projects.
 - d. All state dues have been collected.
 - e. Expenses primarily include contracts costs for T4A and Emergent Method support.
 - f. T4A was able to assist with legislation that could double SRC’s annual budget.

- g. Toby moved to approve the financial statements, and McNair seconded the motion – motion passes.
- III. Communications and Media Update – *Rachel DiResto***
- a. The STB hearings yielded multiple media features.
 - b. Knox has recently participated in interviews regarding the I-20 corridor project that have been featured in Ruston paper and Northside Sun in Jackson.
 - c. Social media following has been consistently growing with 1,100 current page followers.
 - d. Template letters of support for the I-20 corridor project have been circulated to partners.
 - e. Business cards have been ordered for new Mississippi commissioners.
- IV. Legislative Affairs Update - *John Robert Smith and Dennis Barrett***
- a. T4 is national nonprofit work on all transportation modes and connectivity working with entities like airports, rail, and other multimodal projects.
 - b. T4A staff are not lobbyists, but they work on transportation policy issues with decision makers and leaders on the Hill.
 - c. Due to the support of T4A, SRC speaks with more authority on passenger rail on Capitol Hill than any other entity.
 - d. SRC applied for FRA funds and matching funds were provided by Mississippi communities for improving four stations in anticipation of the restoration of gulf coast service.
 - e. T4A wrote grant on behalf of SRC and SRC also secured CRISI grant of \$66M for infrastructure projects.
 - f. SRC also secured a Restoration and Enhancement Grant for operations of gulf coast rail, matched by Mississippi, Louisiana and City of Mobile.
 - g. The 3-year R&E grant will be extended into 6-year grant for operation support by FRA
 - i. Amtrak has committed to additional operating support too
 - ii. Amtrak is in good shape to implement service when STB announces its ruling
 - h. SRC thanks Senator Wicker and Amit Bose for strong comments at STB hearing.
 - i. STB will be a conversation between CSX, NS and Amtrak with Coast Guard in coming weeks.
 - j. For new commissioners, T4A provides a monthly compilation policy report at end of each month.
- V. Dennis report – Toplines**
- a. Fiscal Year 22 (FY22) Appropriations
 - i. Fiscal Year 2021 expired on September 20, 2021
 - ii. Several Continuing Resolutions have been passed to avoid a government shutdown with the most recent one set to expire March 11, 2022
 - iii. The lack of a full appropriations bill is posing significant challenges for USDOT in hiring to implement and administer the new law.
 - iv. In addition, there are some restrictions on the release of certain funds under the new bipartisan infrastructure law
 - v. House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-MD) said there would be a vote on appropriation in the House the week of March 7th.
 - b. Amtrak/CSX Gulf Coast STB Case
 - i. The STB held the public hearing on February 15th and 16th where Knox Ross, John Spain, Greg White, and John Robert Smith all delivered their testimony of facts before the board, which was very well received.

- ii. Senator Roger Wicker (R-MS) and FRA Administrator Amit Bose gave strong openers in support of passenger rail.
 - iii. In stark contrast to the testimony of SRC representatives, CSX's testimony drew blunt rebuke from STB Chairman, Martin Oberman.
 - iv. At times, CSX representatives appeared to be confused about the location of their own infrastructure during the hearing.
 - v. The STB also made it abundantly clear that CSX has not been making investment in its own infrastructure.
 - vi. Amtrak's President, Stephen Gardner, gave a strong and precise close that laid out all of the facts demonstrating CSX's clear attempt to prevent the restoration of Gulf Coast passenger rail service.
 - vii. In a rebuttal filing by CSX and Norfolk Southern (NSR) in Amtrak's appeal to restore Gulf Coast service, CSX and NSR admit that there is capacity on the Gulf Coast Corridor to accommodate passenger trains. In the filing CSX and NSR state:
 - 1. "Amtrak instead proffers an analysis to prove there is sufficient theoretical capacity on the Gulf Coast Corridor to accommodate the passenger trains. But this has never been in dispute. The 2021 Gulf Coast RTC Study also reveals that the passenger trains can be added in 2019 without causing the corridor to grind to a halt (though that is not true in 2039)."
 - viii. From this statement, it is clear that passenger rail service can run along the Gulf Coast Corridor with no additional infrastructure investment right now. It is only until 2039 that this becomes a problem. The law is very clear that payments to host railroads is only to cover the cost of operating the passenger trains now, not in twenty years.
 - ix. Evidentiary hearing was postponed from March 9th to April 5th and 6th.
 - x. Next steps: final decision by STB
 - 1. Following trial with sworn testimony, STB has 90 days for ruling
 - 2. Decision to be made as expeditiously as possible
 - 3. CSX can appeal, but would have to pay legal fees
 - 4. If STB may require some infrastructure improvements
 - 5. If CSX does not appeal, Amtrak can start training crews in preparation for service start
- c. Louisiana and Central Mississippi Meetings in Support of I-20 Corridor
- i. Knox Ross and John Robert Smith held meetings with Louisiana and Central Mississippi local governments to gain support for passenger rail service between Meridian and Dallas/Ft. Worth.
 - ii. T4America has provided a draft resolution to local governments in Louisiana and Central Mississippi in support of Canadian Pacific's acquisition of KCS and passenger rail service between Meridian and Dallas/Ft. Worth.
 - iii. This route could start quickly because infrastructure is in place and relationship with potential host railroad, CP is cooperative.
 - iv. So far, resolutions have been introduced and passed in the following municipalities:

1. Jackson, MS; Jackson MPO; Meridian, MS; Lauderdale Co, MS; Richland, MS; Newton Co, MS; Bossier City, LA; New Orleans, LA; Brandon, MS; Byram, MS; Scott Co, MS; Rankin Co, MS; Hinds Co, MS.
- d. New Orleans to Baton Rouge Service
 - i. Transportation for America has provided a memo to John Spain that outlines the steps Louisiana can take to actualize the New Orleans to Baton Rouge passenger service.
 - ii. There is significant federal funding available from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to pay for infrastructure investments.
 - e. FRA and T4A meetings on Bipartisan Infrastructure Law Implementation
 - i. The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) and Transportation for America have set up quarterly calls regarding the implementation of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the actions FRA can take to strengthen the passenger rail provisions.
 - ii. T4A and SRC leadership are in conversation with FRA on developing strategies to strengthen the SRC to be in a strong position to implement passenger rail service from New Orleans to Mobile and on future routes we wish to run.
 - iii. Increasing dues may allow SRC to receive additional federal funding to support SRC's activities.
 - iv. The SRC will apply for federal matching funds that would allow for the SRC to hire needed permanent staff including an Executive Director and Marketing Director.
 - v. Mississippi DOT has indicated they would be open to increasing dues in order to receive the federal matching funds to support the work of SRC.

OLD BUSINESS:

- I. Report on Executive Committee activities - *Spain, Ross, McNair*
 - a. Meeting with Canadian Pacific in DC and New Orleans
 - i. CP is a potential new partner freight railroad that is cooperative.
 - ii. Former SRC commissioners had built-in relationships with CP and it's remarkable to see the cooperation between Amtrak and CP.
 - iii. Infrastructure bill contained \$66 billion for intercity passenger rail and will benefit our states.
- II. State Reports:
 - a. Louisiana-Updates by John Spain on Baton Rouge to New Orleans and 1-20 passenger services
 - i. Commissioner Lapeyrolerie attended the States for Passenger Rail meeting in DC which was good visibility for this commission.
 - ii. SRC has always committed to ensuring that everything we do benefits both freight and passenger rail interests.
 - iii. SRC welcomed Ann Elise Kelly from JEDCO, an organization with interest in and support for New Orleans to Baton Rouge passenger rail.
 - iv. Jefferson Parish is the second largest parish outside of LA.
 - v. JEDCO convened a meeting with Parish President, GNO Inc, and the Regional Planning Commission of New Orleans, to show support for including rail stops at the airport in Jefferson Parish.

- vi. In Dec. 2021, CP came to New Orleans for a press conference with Gov. Edwards in attendance and committed publicly to allowing one round trip between Baton Rouge and New Orleans at a minimum.
 - vii. The Airport is interested in developing a stop and they want to pursue federal funding such as highway, aviation and railroad funds for a monorail system that would link to the passenger stop, similar to the connection at the BWI airport.
 - viii. Both mayors and all parish presidents have passed resolutions in favor of passenger rail service.
 - ix. John Spain will be meeting with Commissioner of Administration Jay Dardenne and DOTD Secretary Wilson next week. This administration has two years to fulfill their pledge, and they have asked for a list of items to get the project done.
 - x. Gov. Edwards also has a staff leadership meeting next week and Spain will present this list.
 - xi. LA Senator Bill Cassidy who supported the bipartisan infrastructure bill, is also very supportive of passenger rail in North and South LA and is ongoing conversations with the White House.
 - xii. He has expressed support for updating the rail studies and also wants to look at connecting north and south parts of the state with passenger rail in the future.
 - xiii. Mitch Landrieu – czar of infrastructure dollars is a key player for project support.
 - xiv. Having the alignment with CP is very important, and with funding available, along with local, state, and national leadership aligned in support – there has never been a more appropriate time to get this project done.
- b. Mississippi by Knox Ross
- i. Knox testified before House T&I subcommittee in early 2022, developing relationships with members of that committee.
 - ii. Knox and Kay also worked in preparation for the STB hearing and reached out to Hancock Chamber who promoted a petition with 1,000 signatures of support.
 - iii. Knox provided interviews with local media during STB hearings that were very positive.
 - iv. Fruitful discussions are underway with MS DOT about funding logistics for operating service. They have agreed to discuss with FRA to find a way to move this forward.
 - v. MS/LA meeting on I-20 Corridor was very well attended and secured local resolutions.
- c. Alabama by Stephen McNair
- i. The Mobile Mayor and City Council support this project, but SRC appreciates the work by AL commissioners who have challenges with the opposition voice that exists in Alabama.
 - ii. STB hearings had testimony from local partners – the Airport Authority is fully supportive but all other Alabama speakers were in opposition.
 - iii. Mobile has not secured CRISI match funds and City Council commitment of funding is tenuous, but still very optimistic.
 - iv. This project will have a positive impact on city if done the right way, and SRC is trying to make that happen, but we are in a holding pattern at local level until STB ruling.

- v. Alabama already has passenger rail service in Tuscaloosa, Anniston and Birmingham with connections to Crescent, so there is some support in other areas for passenger rail.
- vi. There is a bill in legislature by first responders that addresses when freight railroads block intersections.

NEW BUSINESS:

- I. Karen Parsons, former staff director of SRC, remarked that RPC has been monitoring the BR/NO project and finding ways to support it. RPC has been a long-time partner and was instrumental in securing initial earmarks for SRC. Karen complimented the SRC group which has come so far and the policy work has been incredibly effective.
- II. Updates from Amtrak - Todd Stennis, Amtrak's Senior Manager for Government Affairs and Marc Magliari, Amtrak spokesperson
 - i. IIJA is a huge window of opportunity and SRC is in prime position to take advantage of the funding, but it will be competitive.
 - ii. Every state is interested in growing passenger rail and will have the opportunity to receive funding.
 - iii. NO/BR route – New Orleans Airport is expressing strong interest and a group of their leadership visited the Amtrak facility at BWI to view how the transfer from the terminal to the train works which could be applied to New Orleans airport.
 - iv. Meetings on I-20 Corridor went very well, and Amtrak is looking for an opportunity to complete the study for service from Meridian to Ft. Worth.
 - v. Marc Magliari introduced Bob Johnston (on phone) who has been covering the Gulf Coast issues for Trains Magazine – he encouraged commissioners to review new April feature.

SCHEDULE OF UPCOMING MEETING:

- I. June 3, 2022 Bay St. Louis, Mississippi
- II. September 2, 2022 Alabama
- III. December 2, 2022 Louisiana

ADJOURNMENT