

Louisiana Association of Railroad Passengers

P.O. Box 57551 New Orleans, LA 70157
www.LARPrail.com

March-April 2019 Newsletter

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Amtrak

National Happenings

The Trump administration again proposed in its FY20 budget to get rid of Amtrak's entire national network, but this time they came up with the idea to subsidize buses for one year to supposedly take the place of the trains. The budget is expected to be dead on arrival in Congress as Amtrak enjoys bipartisan support from the House and Senate. This is true even of the GOP-controlled Senate as at least ten Republican Senators will oppose Trump's drastic Amtrak cuts, along with all of the Democrats. The likely outcome will be for a Continuing Resolution to keep Amtrak going again pretty much like it is now as there is no appetite for Democrats in the House and Republicans in the Senate to come together to actually pass budgets.

The Trump administration again brought up infrastructure with President Trump negotiating directly with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer to spend \$2 trillion, but the GOP Senate shot down the proposal. It is unknown whether any rail funds would have been in the bill (news reports mentioned highways and internet upgrades), but it would appear that Majority Leader Mitch McConnell is in no mood to increase spending.

The Wall Street Journal ran a big story in March basically saying that Amtrak was going to cut back its national network in favor of operating only short-distance trains. The WSJ has never been a friend of Amtrak and this hit piece was right in line with what the publication has done in the past. Are there elements at Amtrak that would like to emphasize short distance over long distance – yes. But would Amtrak, as a federally-subsidized corporation, politically be able to pull off such a move – no. Now, what we as rail advocates need to promote to Congress is that Amtrak keep the long-distance trains as an ongoing concern, and not favor one type of train over another. That also includes making sure that the Trump administration doesn't stack the Amtrak Board of Directors with those opposed to the operation of a vibrant national network of trains. Do we need more short distance trains that can serve large markets that Amtrak doesn't currently serve – definitely, but not at the expense of losing nationwide service.

Amtrak recently developed an equipment acquisition plan that calls for the upgrade of long-distance cars and the purchase of new ones. Amtrak has made a supplemental request to Congress to rehab the current Superliner fleet at a cost of \$405 million, and to replace the entire Superliner 1 fleet at a cost of \$1.55 billion. Amtrak has already negotiated a deal to purchase new locomotives from Siemens to replace much of the P-42 fleet. So, if Amtrak management was seriously considering dumping the national system, then why would they ask Congress for so much more money to rehab and replace most of the long distance passenger car fleet?

Regional Happenings

Amtrak no longer provides enough route-specific information to determine monthly totals in ridership or revenue, and they also no longer provide comparisons to prior years.

On Time Performance

For January, 2019, Norfolk Southern again had the worst on-time performance (grade of F) with more than double the amount of delays from freight train interference than the other railroads. The *Crescent* continues to be a problem train with NS, especially west of Atlanta as the train normally loses 2 to 3 hours per day. For February, Canadian National joined Norfolk Southern in really bad on-time performance (grades of F for both). The *Sunset Limited* also suffered badly both months at the hands of Union Pacific and BNSF.

With the high and unacceptable amount of freight train interference that Amtrak trains are experiencing, it's become obvious that many of the freight railroads really don't care if Amtrak runs on time or if they follow the law that gives Amtrak priority over freights. The freight railroads are purposely dispatching their freight trains in the path of Amtrak trains on a regular basis. Once a slower freight train gets in the way Amtrak has to operate at a slower speed behind the freight, unless the railroad allows Amtrak to overtake the freight. Remember that on most routes Amtrak is just a tenant and has no say over how the freight railroads dispatch their trains. The on time performance chart is below for January and February.

Route Name	Jan19 OT%	Feb19 OT%
<i>CITY of New Orleans</i>	59.0%	46.6%
<i>Crescent</i>	28.7%	27.9%
<i>Sunset Limited</i>	16.4%	13.1%
<i>Texas Eagle</i>	43.4%	38.9%

If you are on Twitter, you can follow @AmtrakAlerts to keep abreast of delays to Amtrak trains – if your train is delayed, you can find out the reason for the delay in real time.

Gulf Coast Restoration

There has been no discernable movement with gulf coast restoration to either Mobile or Orlando. The Southern Rail Commission remains hopeful that service can be reinstated at least to Mobile from New Orleans, but so far Mississippi and Alabama have shown little interest in matching federal dollars to upgrade the route for passenger trains.

Baton Rouge

There has been no discernable movement with the Baton Rouge train, either. There was a recent article about Laplace moving forward with designing their depot, but in the same article a KCS spokesperson said that the railroad was not interested in hosting commercial passenger service at all. So in order for the trains to run we will need to line up support from the railroad (which we had previously) with a firm commitment to fund the necessary upgrades (we have never had funding). We still have not seen a real proposal from Louisiana Governor Edwards for the Baton Rouge train, and no legislator has proposed it recently, either. In order for the train to operate it's going to take a real and lasting commitment from state politicians, and also a change in heart at the Kansas City Southern Railroad.



A publicity photo for Illinois Central's *Panama Limited*, likely taken in the early 1940s.

Odds and Ends

- LARP now has an active Facebook page with more than 1,400 followers – “Like” us on Facebook to get rapid notification of news. Our website *LARPrail.com* has also been updated recently and you can now safely **pay your dues on the website**. Check both our Facebook page and the website frequently and get up-to-date information on meeting times, notices, and blog posts.
- Brightline (now Virgin) has enough money to complete the track upgrades north from West Palm Beach to the Orlando airport. The railroad company had a very successful bond sale, raising nearly \$2 billion.
- The *City of New Orleans* didn't operate to New Orleans from late February into early April due to the opening of the Bonnet Carre Spillway. The operating railroad CN forbid passenger trains from crossing the 80-year old trestle, even though their freight trains continued operating over the bridge. Amtrak turned the trains at Jackson, MS from Chicago and bused passengers from New Orleans to Jackson, but in reality Amtrak ran the trains empty from Jackson into New Orleans, serviced the train normally, and then deadheaded the train back to Jackson. It would have been possible theoretically to deadhead to Hammond instead of Jackson and bus passengers the shorter distance, but Hammond no longer has a station agent or the facilities to handle that many passengers. And the Army Corps of Engineers is again talking about opening the Spillway again as of late April, and if that happens Amtrak service will again be suspended.

2019 LARP Officers

John Sita President; **Andrew Lodriguss** Vice-President, **Louis Bangma** Secretary/Treasurer

Dues were payable January 1, 2019.

Join the Louisiana Association of Railroad Passengers and help reconnect our cities by passenger rail once again. Your membership helps LARP advocate for trains and also entitles you to receive a subscription to our newsletter. LARP is a non-profit consumer organization supported solely by yearly dues and contributions of its members. The **next regular LARP meeting will be at 10:00 a.m. Saturday May 11, 2019** at New Orleans Union Passenger Terminal in the second floor conference room.



LARP Membership Application

☐ Single member \$20 ☐ Family Member \$30

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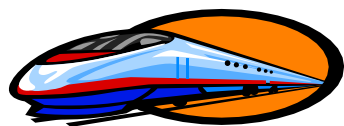
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