

Louisiana Association of Railroad Passengers

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

May-June 2019 Newsletter

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Amtrak

National Happenings

In May, President Trump met with Democratic Congressional leaders to discuss a \$2 trillion infrastructure bill, but the GOP-controlled Senate quickly quashed the idea and said that a tax increase to pay for it was off the table. The Trump administration has tried infrastructure before and failed, and likely they wouldn't propose much (if anything) for passenger rail anyway. The needs are so great from a passenger rail perspective – a new Hudson River Tunnel in New York, new rail cars for Amtrak, passenger rail corridor development, etc. But this administration doesn't believe in taxpayer-funded passenger rail as long as Mick Mulvaney is Chief of Staff. Mulvaney is about as anti-Amtrak as they come and would fight hard to keep any new spending for Amtrak out of the infrastructure bill.

The Trump administration has nominated a former Indiana Congressman Todd Rokita to serve on the Amtrak Board, and while serving in Congress Rokita mostly voted against Amtrak – in particular the national system. Most of the problems Amtrak has are related to its Board of Directors, and the Trump administration is obviously attempting the stack the board with members that would push to shut down the national system.

The House of Representatives was on the verge of passing out \$2 billion for Amtrak as part of a two-year budget deal (each year) until the Trump administration issued a veto threat that particularly mentioned funding for Amtrak's national network. Amtrak enjoys strong bipartisan support in Congress and strong funding would likely pass both the House and Senate in overwhelming numbers, but now the whole budget deal is in disarray and likely Congress may be relegated to passing only a Continuing Resolution. At this point it's hard to say if Trump would again shut down the government – this time over Amtrak funding, but it could be an empty threat. Regardless, it would be a good idea to let your Representative in Congress and your Senator know to support Amtrak funding.

City of New Orleans Service Disruptions

In mid-May the Army Corps of Engineers again opened the Bonnet Carre Spillway (the second time this year), and the railroad CN like the first time refused to allow Amtrak from using its 80-year old wooden bridge across the spillway. The Army Corps is targeting the 2nd or 3rd week of July to start closing the spillway, so mid-July is likely when normal train service will resume. Amtrak has been busing passengers to/from Jackson, MS to New Orleans. CN is been particularly obstinate in that they have refused to allow Amtrak to bus passengers from New Orleans to Hammond instead of Jackson for some unknown reason, increasing Amtrak's costs and decreasing passenger satisfaction. CN's motive may be payback for Amtrak publicly giving them a grade of F for timekeeping.

On Time Performance

Norfolk Southern delays decreased marginally for March – the trains were still late but not as late as they have been. Amtrak assigned NS a grade of D for March. Canadian National was the worst for March with the most delays and earned a grade of F. For April, both Norfolk Southern and Canadian National earned a grade of F with the most delays. The majority of the cause for delays for both months was freight train interference and then slow orders.

Route Name	Mar19 OT%	Apr19 OT%
<i>CITY of New Orleans</i>	40.7%	61.7%
<i>Crescent</i>	22.4%	21.8%
<i>Sunset Limited</i>	8.7%	16.1%
<i>Texas Eagle</i>	15.8%	22.7%

In June, the *Crescent* started operating a little better with several on time arrivals of train 20 at Washington, DC, and even a few on time arrivals of train 19 at New Orleans. And the trains that did run late weren't as late as previous months – we'll see how much the route improved once Amtrak publishes the on time figures later.

Gulf Coast Restoration

In June, Senator Roger Wicker and the Southern Rail Commission announced that \$33 million in federal funds had been secured to help pay for the restoration of service to Mobile. Louisiana and Mississippi have committed matching funds, but so far Alabama has yet to commit. Alabama seems to be dragging its feet in deciding whether or not to support the train, and in particular the Mobile city council deferred action on a resolution in support of the trains. The plan is to operate two frequencies per day and the timeline for the restoration of service is two years. The position of CSX has not changed in demanding billions to build new bridges over the Rigolets; however, the Southern Rail Commission will have about \$60 million to give to CSX for real upgrades. Perhaps CSX will be willing to negotiate now in good faith – we'll see.

Baton Rouge

There was no discernable movement on the Baton Rouge train.

I-20 Corridor

The I-20 Corridor Council has been promoting a Dallas to Atlanta route across north Louisiana, and a capacity study recently completed revealed it would cost as much as \$80 million in enhancements to allow passenger service to be added to the freight line. Amtrak nearly started this route several years ago and even published a tentative timetable for the train but backed out at the last minute due to the cost of reinstatement. Of course, Amtrak doesn't have any equipment available for a new train and barely has enough equipment to operate the trains it already has. However, this line is projected to be operationally profitable if the funding can be found for the track upgrades and equipment.

Precision Scheduled Railroading

Norfolk Southern is joining the ranks of CN and CSX and is implementing its new precision scheduled railroad (PSR) operational plan in the beginning of July. The net effect of PSR will be to run longer freight trains with fewer frequencies. It's hard to say what effect PSR will have on the operation of Amtrak trains – fewer freight frequencies could be good for rail passengers. But if the railroad runs freight trains longer than the passing sidings Amtrak will be forced into the sidings at meets, delaying passengers.

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.
- The state of Illinois just appropriated \$500 million to reinstate Amtrak service between Chicago and Rockford/Quad Cities and to expand capacity on the CN line from Chicago to Carbondale. Illinois joins the ranks of Virginia, North Carolina, and Michigan that are spending hundreds of millions to expand passenger rail. These states have come to realize that the return on investment from taxpayer dollars in economic activity will be many fold.
- CSX has sold its Pensacola to Baldwin, FL rail line to a new RailUSA railroad – the Florida, Gulf & Atlantic, complicating efforts to restore Amtrak service on the line.
- Virgin Trains, formerly Brightline, had a groundbreaking ceremony in Orlando for the start of construction on its 125-mph line east to Cocoa. The new route is expected to open in about 3 years.



The Gulf Mobile & Northern's streamliner *Rebel* at New Albany, MS in the 1930s. Photo by Jim Arvite.

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 July 13, 2019** at New Orleans Union Passenger Terminal in the second floor conference room.



LARP Membership Application

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

Name _____

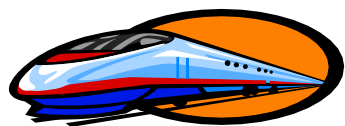
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