

# Louisiana Association of Railroad Passengers

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

## September-October 2019 Newsletter

John Sita, Jr.—Editor  
[jsitajr@gmail.com](mailto:jsitajr@gmail.com)

### Amtrak

#### National Happenings

With all of the political chaos going on in Washington, it's likely that the government will not be able to agree to do much of anything until past the next election – including the passing of budgets. Likely the government will limp from Continuing Resolution to Continuing Resolution, and there may even be another government shutdown or two during the current fiscal year. The Democratic House and the Republican Senate actually negotiated a draft FY21 federal budget in good faith before it was knocked down by the Trump White House (Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney, in particular). The federal government is currently being funded by Continuing Resolution that expires November 21, 2019. The FAST Act that funds all transportation programs expires September 30, 2020, and if the Highway Trust fund is not authorized, then the federal government will not be able to collect gas taxes. Senate Majority Leader McConnell has already said there will be a Transportation bill passed this year and the House would likely pass out a bill, but who knows if President Trump will be in the mood to sign any bills passed by Congress with impeachment looming.

On October 1<sup>st</sup> Amtrak ended traditional dining car service on all one-night trains including the *City of New Orleans* and *Crescent*, along with every other train in the East (except Auto Train). The *Crescent* had been using a format with food (at least partially) prepared on the train, and the *City of New Orleans* had been operating with a modified cross-country café model that coach passengers could also use, but the changes ended coach passenger access. Now sleeping car passengers receive box meals heated in the dining car ovens by one employee, and first class passengers can either eat their meals in their rooms or in the dining car. Amtrak intends on opening access to coach passengers with a reservation-only purchase (meals would be bought with ticket purchase) sometime after the first of the year. The two-night trains west of Chicago and New Orleans (including the *Sunset Limited*) are unaffected by the changes – at least for now.

Amtrak has refreshed its Amfleet II coaches with new interiors and leather-type seats. Although the upgrade is nice these cars are approaching 40 years old and really need to be replaced sooner rather than later. Amtrak has been testing the new Viewliner sleepers but none have appeared on the *Crescent* as of yet.

#### On Time Performance

For the month of July, the *Sunset Limited* host railroads BNSF and Union Pacific both earned the grade of B from Amtrak. The *City of New Orleans* operator CN earned a D, and *Crescent* operator Norfolk Southern earned an F still. The *Texas Eagle* did not do well at all (Union Pacific). For the month of August, the *Sunset Limited* host railroads BNSF earned the grade of B and Union Pacific C. Union Pacific performed much worse than in previous

months. The *City of New Orleans* host railroad CN earned a D as well as *Crescent* operator Norfolk Southern (an improvement from F from previous months). The *Crescent* has definitely improved, if only marginally. The *Texas Eagle* still did not do well at all (Union Pacific).

On time performance has a huge affect on Amtrak's bottom line. When trains are late, Amtrak pays more in labor costs, particularly in overtime. Then when trains are late enough to miss connections with other trains, Amtrak has to pay to reaccommodate passengers with hotel rooms, food stipends, and even plane tickets. Most of the host railroad delays are either from freight train interference or signaling problems, and if the railroads simply gave Amtrak trains the priority as prescribed by law, Amtrak could likely save \$40-\$50 million per year. When lost revenue is factored in the bottom line detrimental impact of poor on time performance could easily be \$75-\$100 million range per year.

Route Name	Jul19 OT%	Jul19 Mins Delay	Aug19 OT%	Aug19 Mins Delay
<i>CITY of New Orleans</i>	48.2%	58	62.1%	83
<i>Crescent</i>	30.7%	102	30.4%	92
<i>Sunset Limited</i>	23.1%	198	14.4%	170
<i>Texas Eagle</i>	23.1%	147	25.0%	117

A new column on the chart is the average passenger minutes of delay.

## Gulf Coast Restoration

In addition to the \$33 million in federal funds to upgrade infrastructure, the gulf coast route received another federal grant of \$4.36 million to pay for the first year of operating expenses. However, Alabama's governor Kay Ivey is still non-committal to the project. Alabama has not yet committed to its share of the \$33 million in federal match, and the Port of Mobile is fighting the project at every turn. The latest is on the location of the new Mobile depot. The assumption was that the new depot would be somewhere downtown near the old location, or perhaps near the convention center, but now the port is pushing for a depot near the airport. It is strange how much power the port has in deciding where to put the new depot. The location of the depot should be where it will maximize ridership and passenger convenience, not to placate the Port of Mobile and possible delays to coal export trains.

Amtrak is anticipating operating two frequencies per day from New Orleans to Mobile with a 3 hour 23 minute schedule with stops in Bay St. Louis, Gulfport, Biloxi, and Pascagoula. The maximum speed would be 79 mph and the trains would be operated on convenient daytime schedules designed to maximize local patronage.

## Baton Rouge Train

In an economic forum put on by the Baton Rouge Area Chamber, Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards enthusiastically endorsed the concept of a Baton Rouge train and said that he would seek funding for it in the coming year. Edwards and his challenger Rispone are locked in a tight runoff election and both are currently polling at 47%. If Rispone wins likely there won't be any progress on the Baton Rouge train for at least four years – the idea of taxpayer money used for the train would be completely dormant. Even if Edwards does win reelection progress likely will be slow with the legislature hesitant to fund the \$250-\$300 million in infrastructure upgrades the train route will need. There may be the possibility of getting federal funding but a state match will be required, amounting to at least \$50-\$60 million required by the state. Also, opposition from the Kansas City Southern Railroad will slow progress – their official corporate position is that they won't operate any commercial passenger trains (Amtrak or otherwise). The Baton Rouge train will happen when support lines up from the federal government, Louisiana state government, and the KCS railroad all at the same time.



The L&N lunch-counter car Dixie Traveler used on its *Pan American* train in the 1960s. The car lacked table cloths and silver but still provided good hot meal service to passengers (not boxed meals). Photo by Ron Flanary.

## 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 *LARPail.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.
- Virgin officially began construction north of West Palm Beach on the way to Orlando on September 23<sup>rd</sup>. The scope of the work includes laying a second main track, and west of Cocoa building a new railroad line. The FEC Railway used to be double track all the way from Jacksonville to Miami to the alignment is still there, although fiber optic cables will have to be moved. Service to Orlando is expected to begin late 2022. Virgin is also in the planning stages on its Victorville to Las Vegas train. Although the train is not initially planned to go into downtown Los Angeles, the route from Victorville would be 185 miles nonstop at speeds up to 150 mph. The line is expected to cost \$4 billion and the company intends to finance construction the same way as it did in Florida.

## 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 November 2, 2019** at New Orleans Union Passenger Terminal in the second floor conference room.



### LARP Membership Application

Single member \$20     Family Member \$30

Name \_\_\_\_\_

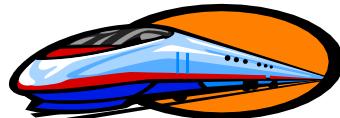
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I can work actively for LARP. Please contact me.

MAIL TO: Louisiana Association of Railroad Passengers  
P.O. Box 57551  
New Orleans, LA 70157



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P.O. Box 57551    New Orleans, LA 70157

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