



Louisiana Association of Railroad Passengers

P.O. Box 57551 New Orleans, LA 70157
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January-February 2020 Newsletter

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Amtrak

National Happenings

The Trump administration again proposed to cut Amtrak funding for FY21, this time by 50% of current levels. It's almost like they copied/pasted the previous year's budget into this year's budget. Even though President Trump talks about infrastructure, passenger rail is obviously not a component – but it definitely should be. Increasing funding for Amtrak could have many positive effects like higher economic activity, increasing mobility, reducing highway traffic deaths, mitigating air pollution, and on and on. Like last year the Administration's current budget for transportation is pure fantasy as it proposes a huge increase in funding for highways without a way to pay for it. The budget will be DOA in Congress, even in the Republican-controlled Senate, and Amtrak likely will receive about \$2 billion like they have for the past couple of years. The Democratic-controlled House released a \$55 billion/5 year plan for Amtrak (more than a five-fold increase over what they receive now) and there is no way the House will tolerate Amtrak cuts from the Trump administration. Even though the Trump budget has a zero chance of being enacted it's disappointing that the Administration simply doesn't get it concerning the importance of Amtrak.

Amtrak announced it had hired a new CEO to replace Richard Anderson – his name is Michael Flynn. It had been widely speculated that Anderson, who was not a popular CEO with stakeholders, would be leaving this year. The Wall Street Journal even published a story in late December about Anderson's impending departure. Flynn is a former CSX executive and recently was CEO at Atlas Air, a freight and charter-passenger airline. Flynn will start April 15. Flynn's area of expertise is providing a high level of customer service, so hopefully he will reverse some of the drastic cuts Anderson made to onboard service. Having managed a successful airline is not a disqualification just because of Anderson's tenure, and Flynn does have two years of actual railroad experience. If Flynn indeed does value customer service, and considers the concept of a truly nationwide network of trains to be important, then he should do fine. Amtrak needs a Board of Directors and a CEO that values providing good passenger service as the most important goal. Making a profit should be a secondary goal.

On Time Performance

The *City of New Orleans* continued to do well, coming in well under Amtrak's goal for minutes of delay. The *Crescent* struggled, and many runs were hours late due to freight congestion. The *Sunset Limited* was consistently delayed on the BNSF both ways due to speed restrictions, and UP had problems with freight congestion around San Antonio. The *Texas Eagle* was severely delayed pretty much from the time it departed Chicago Union Station until it finally reached San Antonio.

Route Name	Nov19 OT%	Nov19 Mins Delay	Dec19 OT%	Dec19 Mins Delay
<i>CITY of New Orleans</i>	79.5%	748	78.2%	624
<i>Crescent</i>	35.1%	1440	33.0%	1361
<i>Sunset Limited</i>	14.6%	1869/1797	28.0%	1370/1181
<i>Texas Eagle</i>	37.4%	2768/1675/2812/1482	60.2%	2178/1424/2245/1553

Amtrak's goal is for less than 900 minutes of delay per train per month. The *Sunset Limited* minutes of delays numbers were BNSF/UP railroads, respectively. The *Texas Eagle* minutes of delay were CN/UP/TRE/BNSF. Trains that operate consistently late increase Amtrak's losses, and late trains can severely inconvenience passengers. Imagine a train load of passengers coming in for a meeting or special event and then missing that event because the freight railroad can't properly manage their traffic.

Gulf Coast Restoration

In early February, the Mobile City Council voted to allocate \$3 million to reinstate service into Mobile. Louisiana and Mississippi had committed money to match the federal dollars, but Alabama had refused – so the Southern Rail Commission asked the city of Mobile to make the contribution. It was a big amount of money for a city the size of Mobile, but the projected economic benefits of the train were so overwhelming that the City Council voted in favor (a 15 to 1 return on taxpayer dollars in economic benefits). The next obstacle will be getting the cooperation of the host railroad CSX – previously the railroad under CEO Hunter Harrison demanded \$2 billion to reinstate Amtrak service. However, it is believed that CSX will be more reasonable this time. The Southern Rail Commission expects Amtrak service to start in two years, and they plan to spend about \$8 million in Louisiana improving Gentilly Yard, about \$45 million in Mississippi building new/extending passing sidings and reducing terminal freight congestion, and about \$5 million in Alabama building a new track for the Mobile depot and other track improvements. The new Mobile depot is planned to be built near the Mobile airport west of downtown, and part of the airport facility is already served by rail.

Restoring Amtrak service east of Mobile into the Florida panhandle won't be impossible, but it will be difficult for several reasons. The port of Mobile will resist any attempts to operate Amtrak service east of Mobile as they believe that reinstating passenger trains will adversely impact freight rail to the port. Also, the new shortline operator from Pensacola to Baldwin will not maintain the entire line end to end for an expedited passenger train. The railroad Florida Gulf & Atlantic calls itself a Class 3 railroad, and that class has a 60-mph speed limit for passenger trains (40-mph for freight). Formerly the CSX line east of Chattahoochee was a Class 4 line with 60-mph freights and 79-mph passenger trains. Much of the line is welded rail and is in decent shape, but the line west of Chattahoochee is still unsignaled and the entire line lacks positive train control. It will be a challenge to raise the required capital to improve the track and signal systems. Still, a daily, overnight Amtrak line across the panhandle of Florida would greatly increase mobility for Louisiana and gulf coast residents, and if it were operated on time and it had a good connection directly to Orlando the train could be successful. If speeds could be increased to 110 or even 125 mph passenger rail could be a game changer in this corridor.

Baton Rouge Train

There has been no recent movement or news stories on the Baton Rouge train. Louisiana Governor Edwards remains committed to the project, but no source of funding has been identified.

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 *LARPral.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/Virgin passenger counts were up 56% in January, 2020, compared to the same month last year. The company is also well along in construction north of West Palm Beach and also the high-speed line from Cocoa to the Orlando Airport. They are also designing the new depot for Disneyworld.
- Picayune, MS is getting an improved train platform. The \$4 million project will lengthen the platform to 400 feet and will take several months to complete. The project will also rebuild the walkway from the parking lot to the platform to include ramps and handrails and will add new lighting, improve drainage and add warning strips.



L&N's "Hummingbird" at Bay St. Louis in 1947. Photo by Ron Flanary.

2019 LARP Officers

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

Dues were payable January 1, 2020.

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 March 21, 2020** at New Orleans Union Passenger Terminal in the second floor conference room. During this meeting we will vote for our 2020 officers.



LARP Membership Application

Single member \$20 Family Member \$30

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I can work actively for LARP. Please contact me.

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