

Louisiana Association of Railroad Passengers

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May-June 2020 Newsletter

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Amtrak

National Happenings

Late in May, Amtrak outlined proposals to reduce the frequencies of their trains across the country, hitting both the corridors and long-distance trains. Amtrak proposes to reduce the frequency of nearly all long-distance trains to 3 days a week down from 7 days a week, including both the *City of New Orleans* and *Crescent* (the *Sunset Limited* is already tri weekly). The only train to be spared would be the Auto Train. The frequency cuts are to happen October 1, but Amtrak may not wait that long as it appears they have already started with the two Florida trains with the *Silver Meteor* running 4 days a week and the *Silver Star* 3 days. It is true that Amtrak ridership is far less than pre-virus levels with long distance still down 70% from last year, but the frequency cuts will only make ridership and losses worse. We have been down this road before with previous Amtrak attempts to save money by cutting frequencies only resulted in reduced demand and depressed revenue more than any cost savings. Amtrak intends to lay off 20% of its employees and supposedly save \$150 million next fiscal year, but again previous attempts to reduce frequencies have never resulted in the savings that were promised.

Basically, tri-weekly trains are a financial bust and if a train is not daily it really isn't serious transportation. Most travelers are not going to plan their travel over whether a train runs that day or not, and rail advocates for years have campaigned to try and get the tri-weekly trains (*Sunset Limited* and *Cardinal*) operating daily to improve their utility. Amtrak says that they can't expect Congress to keep funding mostly empty trains, but so far there has not been much criticism directed at Amtrak for the lack of passengers (due to the pandemic). Amtrak intends on running fewer frequencies throughout all of FY21 but would gauge demand and increase frequencies if warranted, but so far Amtrak has not released its benchmarks for deciding when to go back to daily operation. Keep in mind that Amtrak got an extra \$1 billion in CARES Act money to keep the trains running and to avoid layoffs, and next year they are asking for nearly \$1.5 billion more (with the frequency cuts to happen anyway). Bipartisan pushback has developed from several Senators asking Amtrak not to cut frequencies and questioning Amtrak's reasons for doing so. These Senators know that the trains provide an lifeline to many rural communities in their states and losing 4 out 7 runs per week is going to hurt them economically. The Rail Passengers Association (NARP) has been very vocal in its opposition and the hope is we can get this terrible idea stopped.

In the beginning of June, the House introduced a new transportation bill *Invest in America*. The official name is, "Investing in a New Vision for the Environment and Surface Transportation in America Act," and it provides \$58 billion for rail in total, authorizing \$16.2 billion for the National network and \$13.1 billion for the Northeast Corridor over five years, or about three times what Amtrak normally receives in taxpayer dollars. The bill codifies the National Network, gets rid of the onerous food service profitability requirements from previous authorizations, and enhances on time improvements for passengers. The House is pushing for final passage of the bill by the July

4th recess, and the next step is for the Senate to pass its own authorizing bill. The *Invest in America* bill funds all transportation including highways so there is a strong incentive for the Senate to pass a bill this year. Highways will need to be reauthorized as well, including the ability to collect gas taxes.

In mid-May Amtrak started requiring passengers to wear a facemask while in their stations or on board the trains. Passengers may remove their mask while eating, sitting in their private room, or in the coach while seated. The mask is expected to be worn when walking about the train. Amtrak already limits coach sales to 50% of capacity to maintain social distancing with a much-enhanced schedule of cleaning.

The Trump administration has nominated two qualified appointments for the Amtrak Board of Directors – Sarah Feinberg and Chris Koos. Feinberg is the interim head of New York's MTA transit agency, and Koos is the Mayor of Normal, IL. Both are Democrats and their nominations are expected to pass Senate confirmation quickly. The Board has been the source of Amtrak's problems for quite some time and it needs to be filled with people that are passionate about a national network of trains. There were four others of questionable qualifications that were nominated last year that Senator Moran (R-KS) had holds on, and two of them (Gruters and Westmoreland) have been resubmitted for Senate confirmation by the Administration and passed their initial confirmation votes on a partisan basis (Republicans for, Democrats against). Amtrak has eight voting members of the Board and when their terms expire, they can serve until they are replaced. Some of the terms have been expired for three to five years.

On Time Performance

For March, on-time performance was generally decent except for Norfolk Southern. The total on-time performance for March was 81.7% with long-distance trains at 59.6% (a little better than average). For April, on-time performance was 82.9% with long-distance at 69.1%, improved likely because of the pandemic-related drop in freight moved by the railroads.

Route Name	Mar20 OT%	Mar20 Mins Delay	Apr20 OT%	Apr20 Mins Delay
<i>CITY of New Orleans</i>	75.8%	877	74.2%	726
<i>Crescent</i>	35.7%	2066	52.5%	1387
<i>Sunset Limited</i>	12.3%	2266/2352	34.6%	1446/1450
<i>Texas Eagle</i>	25.6%	2549/2405/1535/2525	63.8%	1418/1334/1809/1562

Amtrak's goal is for less than 900 minutes of delay per train per month. Minutes of delay for the *Sunset Limited* is BNSF/UP, and the *Texas Eagle* CN/UP/TRE/BNSF. The *Sunset Limited* route on the BNSF is pretty much delayed every trip due to slow orders.

Gulf Coast Restoration/Baton Rouge

The gulf coast train was awarded \$5.45 million more in federal money to fund projected operational expenses through the second year. The new funding is in addition to \$33 million in federal dollars to complete capital improvements to the CSX line to allow for passenger operations, along with \$4.36 million for operations. Mississippi Senators Wicker, Hyde-Smith, and Congressman Palazzo all made statements in support of the proposed Amtrak service. So far about \$66 million has been collected from the federal government and matching state sources (in Alabama's case the city of Mobile). There is still no word from CSX how much they will require to reinstate service – previously they had insisted on \$2 billion to operate any Amtrak trains but that was under different railroad management. It is hoped that CSX will be more reasonable than it was before.

There is no news on the Baton Rouge train.

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.
- In mid-May Brightline announced that they would not reinstate service in the coming months, saying, “due to CDC social distancing guidelines, mandated work-from-home policies and other considerations, it is expected to take a long period of time for service demand to return to pre-virus levels.” Although work does continue on the northern part of the route to operate trains into Orlando, it could be well later this year or into next year before train service from Miami to West Palm Beach returns.
- Texas Central won a key battle in court over whether it was a railroad or not. A lower court had ruled that it wasn’t a railroad and that it didn’t have the right of eminent domain, but an appeals court reversed that ruling. Texas Central has to walk a fine line to keep down controversy and says that it will take as little land as possible and fully compensate the owners. Hopefully they will be able to start construction soon of their high speed line between Dallas and Houston.



Southern Railway's *Southern Crescent* southbound at Purvis, MS in June, 1974. Photo by John Sita.

2020 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 in July, likely virtually via Zoom** – if you would like to join in send an email to jsitajr@gmail.com.



LARP Membership Application

Single member \$20 Family Member \$30

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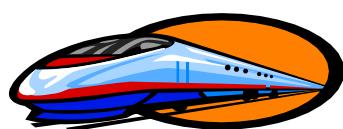
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