

Louisiana Association of Railroad Passengers

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November-December 2020 Newsletter

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Amtrak

National Happenings

Amtrak's Reauthorization did not happen before the end of the fiscal year ending September 2020, meaning that the company's legal authority has lapsed. It actually sounds worse than it is as not reauthorizing programs has become a common practice in the recent dysfunctional Congresses. Amtrak is currently being funded by Continuing Resolution. Amtrak's business has declined significantly in all of its business units because of the Coronavirus with short-distance trains suffering the most. For the fiscal year ending September 30, 2020, Amtrak incurred an \$800 million loss. Remember that Amtrak was expected to turn a profit in 2020 for the first time ever. Amtrak's revenues were \$2.3 billion, a decrease of 31.9% from last year. Amtrak carried just 16.8 million passengers in 2020, down 47.4% year over year, a decrease of 15.2 million passengers. Amtrak's ridership has been about 25% of last year's ridership, and they expect ridership to be at about 37% of last year by the end of FY21. Amtrak had asked for \$4.9 billion in FY21, but it looks like they are going to receive only about \$3 billion this year unless there is another supplemental spending bill. Amtrak received a \$1 billion supplement in the first Covid-Relief bill this past spring and just recently received another \$1 billion in the latest Covid bill just passed by Congress.

The election of Joe Biden as President should be of great benefit to Amtrak. Biden has long been a supporter of Amtrak, commuting daily from his home in Delaware to/from Washington, DC while serving in the Senate. Also, Biden plans to nominate Pete Buttigieg as Transportation Secretary, and Buttigieg has been a supporter of rail passenger service as mayor of South Bend, IN, as well as being a supporter of high-speed rail. It is likely that Biden will push for increased Amtrak funding in any new Infrastructure Bill that will likely pass Congress, or perhaps when Amtrak is finally Reauthorized. Amtrak has been floating a \$25 billion plan with the Biden transition team to increase frequencies in many short-distance corridors around the country.

Tri-Weekly Trains

Amtrak reduced the frequency of nearly all of its long-distance trains to just three days a week starting the first week of October. Amtrak has not released when they plan to restore daily service, even though they have just received an additional \$1 billion to make up for lost business. There will be many issues to Amtrak to resolve to restore daily service. First, they will need to rehire the 2,000 employees that were furloughed, and then many of those in operations will have to requalify in their territories. Second, several major railroads have told Amtrak that they won't assent to the demand to restore daily service, requiring Amtrak to litigate to restore service. Third, Amtrak will have to incur significant expense to bring back daily service. It is not like any of this is a surprise in that rail advocates in the national Rail Passenger Association and several state organizations told Amtrak that they

would encounter these problems and yet the company proceeded to cut service anyway. Also, keep in mind that Amtrak is likely not saving any money with these cuts. There has been significant push back from a bi-partisan group of Senators that are pushing Amtrak to restore daily service as soon as possible.

On Time Performance

For October, on-time performance was 84.6% with long-distance at 60.8%. Every railroad operator earned a grade of “A” or “B” from Amtrak concerning on time performance for the month of October. For November, on time performance was 84.9% with long distance at 58.3%. All roads again earned an “A” or “B” for November.

Route Name	Oct20 OT%	Oct20 Delay/Rider	Nov20 OT%	Nov20 Delay/Rider
<i>CITY of New Orleans</i>	64.7%	64 minutes	73.5%	222 minutes
<i>Crescent</i>	55.6%	70 minutes	40.6%	89 minutes
<i>Sunset Limited</i>	24.6%	123 minutes	26.2%	87 minutes
<i>Texas Eagle</i>	59.3%	70 minutes	68.8%	108 minutes

On time performance is for all stations, and minutes of delay is the average minutes late per late rider.

Gulf Coast Restoration/Baton Rouge

There have been no recent news reports for either the Gulf Coast or Baton Rouge trains, although work continues behind the scenes to restore service. The Mississippi Gulf Coast is probably further along than Baton Rouge, and perhaps with a passenger rail friendly Biden administration that more funding will be made available. The capital improvements required for both corridors will likely be considerable. The KCS track from New Orleans to Baton Rouge is limited in top speed with a 10-mph slow order on the bridge over the Bonnet Carre Spillway, along with congestion near the Marathon facility in Garyville. On the Gulf Coast, there are long stretches of single track with one section being nearly 20 miles in length. There are plans to add more sidings with the money already received, but there has still not been an agreement negotiated with track owner CSX.

Progress in Other States

In Florida, Brightline intends to reinstate passenger service on the West Palm to Miami portion of its route sometime in the third quarter of 2021, depending on if the Coronavirus has sufficiently abated by then. Passenger service north into the Orlando International Airport is expected to open in 2022, and the new route to Tampa with a stop at Disney Springs is expected to open in 2023. Disney Springs is a shopping/entertainment complex outside of the theme parks in Orlando and is connected by Disney transit to all of the theme parks and resorts.

In North Carolina, plans are underway to continue enhancement to the Charlotte to Raleigh corridor, even though the pandemic has temporarily reduced the number of passengers carried. The state of North Carolina was the recipient of over \$500 million in federal dollars several years ago that allowed them to expand capacity and improve speeds on the Norfolk Southern track. And now the real exciting development is the potential of the reinstatement of railroad operations from Raleigh to Richmond. North Carolina recently received a \$47.5 million grant to purchase right of way of the old Seaboard Railroad alignment that was abandoned by CSX in the early 1990s. Plans are to build a higher-speed line between the two cities with a maximum initial speed of 110-mph. The state of Virginia has already acquired the right of way south of Richmond to the state line.

New York City is set to open up the Moynihan Train Hall in early January. The new space built in the old Farley post office will take the place of the old underground Penn Station, although the old platforms will continue to be used.

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.
- Norfolk Southern is assembling what looks like a small army of track workers and intends on laying new rail on portions of the old NO&NE from New Orleans to Meridian, MS. Amtrak has not posted anything on its website, but likely certain trips of the Crescent will be annulled south of Atlanta due to track work.
- The new CN bridge over the Bonnet Carre Spillway opened to rail traffic in late November, including Amtrak. The CN Railway had refused to allow Amtrak to operate its *City of New Orleans* train over the old wooden bridge during several week periods when the spillway was open, and those disruptions will now come to an end.
- Meridian, MS, Tuscaloosa, AL, and Hammond, LA got their station agents back in mid-November. These stations had been destaffed along with many others in 2018.



Southern Railway's Southern Crescent at the Seabrook Drawbridge in New Orleans in July, 1978, in the last year before Amtrak took over operation of the train. Photo by John Sita.

2020 LARP Officers

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Dues are payable January 1, 2021.

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



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

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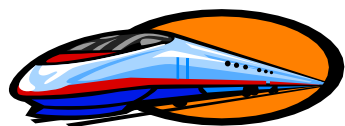
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