

# Louisiana Association of Railroad Passengers

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## January-February 2021 Newsletter

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### Amtrak

#### National Happenings

Most long-distance Amtrak trains have been operating tri-weekly since last October, and there were not any moves being made to reinstate daily service. Amtrak management had been saying that they needed \$1.5 billion more to restore daily operations in addition to the \$1 billion that they just received in December's Covid Relief bill. The incoming Biden administration and Democrats had plans for a large Covid Relief bill to supplement the one just passed by the Trump administration and the Republican-controlled Senate. So just after taking office President Biden introduced the *American Rescue Plan*, a large \$1.9 trillion Covid Relief bill. This one bill is almost twice as large as a year's worth of federal domestic spending. At the urging of rail advocates and the agreement from President Biden, the \$1.5 billion needed to restore daily Amtrak operation was inserted into both the House and Senate Covid relief bills. The House passed their bill on a strictly party-line vote, and the Senate is expected to take up their bill by the beginning of March. The goal is to pass the Senate version of the relief bill by the first week of March, and then it will likely go back to the House for another vote before being signed by President Biden. The goal for the Biden administration is to pass the bill by mid-March using the "Budget Reconciliation" procedure in the Senate, requiring only 50 votes and the Vice President to break the tie. So far, no Republicans have supported the *American Rescue Plan* relief bill, although several of them have made amendments and contributed to the bill. The relief bill as proposed by President Biden has the support of 70% of Americans and even most Republicans, but for whatever reason the Republicans in Congress have decided to stone wall anyway.

There is language in the *American Rescue Plan* that mandates that Amtrak return trains to daily operation within 90 days of the enactment of the bill, which would impose a mid-June deadline. Amtrak has a lot of work to do to bring back daily trains. Amtrak will have to rehire operating employees that were furloughed and then likely requalify them on their routes. Amtrak plans to do a "refresh" on the train equipment that has sat idle for six months, and then will have to get reluctant and hostile railroads to agree to reinstate train frequencies that have not operated for several months. At least one major railroad told Amtrak they will have to litigate to get their daily frequencies restored. Since the law will include daily trains as a legal mandate, perhaps the railroad legal departments will not want to get in the way of the intent of the law – and of making enemies of the Biden Administration.

It finally appears that the Coronavirus will be soon going away for the most part with the successful Covid vaccination program taking hold here in the United States and elsewhere. Economists are predicting rapid economic growth and low unemployment by the end of this year. If "herd immunity" is achieved by summer, then discretionary travel and tourism will once again come back, and passengers will flock to ride Amtrak trains again. Amtrak provides a large economic boost to the communities that it serves and reinstating daily service will make

the trains a lot more useful than there are now. The real question is how much of Northeast Corridor and commuter rail traffic will return after the Coronavirus is no longer an issue. Many businesses have been using Zoom and other technologies in the place of face-to-face meetings, but there are limits to these Internet-based tools and at least some of that business travel will eventually return. But there is real concern that some of that short-distance traffic, especially in the Northeast, will never return, crippling Amtrak's Northeast Corridor and other commuter rail operations.

The Biden Administration nominated Pete Buttigieg as Transportation Secretary and he was confirmed by the Senate with a large majority of the Senate, getting like 86 votes to confirm. Buttigieg is an advocate of passenger rail and has ridden Amtrak long-distance services in the past – and wants to be part of increasing Amtrak's scope and relevance. It likely that Buttigieg played a key role in getting Amtrak included in the *American Rescue Plan*, and Buttigieg will likely promote Amtrak in the upcoming Infrastructure bill that will likely be the next piece of major legislation to come up after the Covid Relief bill. Evidently Democrats can use the same Reconciliation procedure on Infrastructure that was used on the Relief bill, and there was talk inside of the Biden administration about a \$25 billion high-speed corridor plan even before President Biden took office.

## On Time Performance

For December, on-time performance was 84.8% with long-distance at 63.6%. Every railroad operator earned a grade of "A" or "B" from Amtrak concerning on time performance for the month of December. For January, on time performance was 84.9% with long distance at 58.3%. All roads again earned an "A" or "B" for January.

Route Name	Dec20 OT%	Dec20 Delay/Rider	Jan21 OT%	Jan21 Delay/Rider
<i>CITY of New Orleans</i>	77.3%	56 minutes	72.3%	46 minutes
<i>Crescent</i>	42.5%	75 minutes	42.4%	100 minutes
<i>Sunset Limited</i>	27.7%	120 minutes	22.7%	81 minutes
<i>Texas Eagle</i>	82.2%	83 minutes	65.9%	129 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

In late February, Amtrak announced that it intended to start service on the Gulf Coast from New Orleans to Mobile in 2022 and were notifying Norfolk Southern and CSX Railroads of their intention. Then, a couple of days later, the main railroad operator CSX said that Amtrak had not reached an agreement with their railroad. Evidently the railroads have been working on a study for the impact on the port of Mobile of the Amtrak trains, and it appears that the study completion has taken longer than Amtrak thinks it should.

The Southern Rail Commission has \$66 million ready to go to spend on improvements to the route, but they are just waiting on CSX to tell them what they need. There are long segments of the route that are single track that could well use a passing siding. Hopefully, CSX will be far more reasonable than they were the last time the subject of Amtrak trains came up as they demanded \$2 billion in infrastructure improvements. Amtrak and the Southern Rail Commission are serious and highly committed about returning train service to from New Orleans to Mobile, but a lot of work remains before the trains can operate. First, the stations will all have to be made ADA compliant, and Mobile does not even have a station at all. And second, whatever track work that CSX demands will also have to be completed – and CSX hasn't produced such a list of projects or their cost. Starting service in early 2022 seems a bit optimistic, but it could happen if the station and track work is completed this year.

## 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 intends to reinstate passenger service from Miami to West Palm Beach by the end of 2021. They have continued to work on their Orlando line construction and it's estimated now to be 50% complete, and passenger service should start to Orlando sometime either late 2022 or early in 2023.
- SunRail, the commuter railway in Orlando, is formally studying the building of a connection to the Orlando International Airport and share some of Brightline's tracks at the airport. The connection would come off of SunRail at their Meadow Woods station. This new connection would be a game changer for SunRail and allow them to expand service on nights and weekends, and make it much easier to access the airport via public transit.



Kansas City Southern's 'Southern Belle' at Salisaw, OK, August 1968. Photo by Mike Condren.

## 2020 LARP Officers

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

**Dues were 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.



### LARP Membership Application

Single member \$20     Family Member \$30

Name \_\_\_\_\_

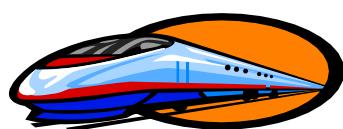
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