



Louisiana Association of Railroad Passengers

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www.LARPrail.com

March-April 2021 Newsletter

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Amtrak

National Happenings

The Covid Relief bill did pass in early March and Amtrak received \$1.7 billion, and within a couple of days of passage Amtrak announced the recall of furloughed employees and the reinstatement of daily service. The *CITY of New Orleans* is to resume daily operation May 31 and the *Crescent* June 7. Amtrak bookings for the summer are looking better than expected with many trains doing well with advanced bookings, and Amtrak intends to sell 100% of the seats by the end of May.

The Biden administration has proposed a massive \$2.3 trillion infrastructure plan that would spend \$80 billion on passenger rail improvements over ten years. The new spending would build out 30 corridors, including New Orleans to Baton Rouge. The Obama administration had \$10 billion for passenger rail with the 2009 ARRA Stimulus, but many states refused to accept the funds. What Biden proposes is much larger and would be direct federal expenditures via Amtrak or other parties, bypassing states that would refuse the money for political reasons. The entire plan is supposed to be budget neutral, so it's not supposed to increase the deficit. It's possible that this infrastructure plan could be passed with budget reconciliation and 50 votes like the Covid Relief bill, but the President Biden is attempting to negotiate with GOP Senators to get bipartisan buy in. It's unclear at this point whether there would be ten Republican votes to overcome a certain filibuster, but Biden wants to try this approach first. The initial Republican counteroffer was under \$600 billion so it remains to be seen if a compromise can be reached.

Amtrak is asking for nearly \$5.5 billion for FY22 starting October of this year, a pretty big increase over the \$2 billion that Amtrak has received the past several years. Amtrak actually received about \$5 billion with their regular appropriation and two rounds of stimulus, so \$5.5 billion is not really out of the realm of possibility. With an appropriation of \$5.5 billion Amtrak could start building new cars for the national system, or put money into track work to decrease choke points.

Crescent Schedule Change

Amtrak has revised and lengthened the schedule of both northbound and southbound trains effective June 7 when the trains resume daily operation. Train 20 will depart New Orleans at 9:15 am and arrives Atlanta 11:00 pm and Washington, DC 2:12 pm. It looks like they have added about 2 hours to the northbound schedule. Southbound 19 still departs Washington at 6:30 pm, departs Atlanta 30 minutes later than now, and arrives New Orleans 1.5 hours later at 9:02. The trains are about 4 hours slower than what the Southern Railway operated in 1940.

On Time Performance

For February, on-time performance was 78.0% with long-distance at 48.8%. Most railroad operators earned a grade of “A” or “B” from Amtrak concerning on time performance for the month of February, except for Norfolk Southern that earned an “F” for having delays over 1,500 minutes. For March, on time performance was 83.8% with long distance at 49.7%. All roads again earned an “A” or “B” for March, except Norfolk Southern that improved slightly to a “D”.

Route Name	Feb21 OT%	Feb21 Delay/Rider	Mar21 OT%	Mar21 Delay/Rider
<i>CITY of New Orleans</i>	63.2%	37 minutes	65.0%	86 minutes
<i>Crescent</i>	41.7%	79 minutes	34.0%	118 minutes
<i>Sunset Limited</i>	14.1%	154 minutes	21.4%	81 minutes
<i>Texas Eagle</i>	34.2%	110 minutes	49.2%	100 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

A lot of news on the gulf coast. Amtrak got tired of waiting for the traffic study on CSX & NS and made a petition directly to the Surface Transportation Board to order the reinstatement of service. The traffic study is basically being demanded by the port of Mobile to determine if Amtrak would unduly interfere with the port’s business. The study was open-ended with no conclusion in sight, hence the appeal to regulators to force the issue. Amtrak intends on starting twice daily service to Mobile on January 1, 2022. The railroads have appealed, and it’s unknown how the STB will rule. However, the railroads have been dragging out this whole process of Amtrak reinstatement for at least five years and haven’t negotiated in good faith – so that might be in Amtrak’s favor. The strong push from Amtrak is very welcome and should at least force the railroads to negotiate in good faith – especially if the STB rules in Amtrak’s favor.

Regardless of how the STB rules, the reality is that Amtrak likely will not be ready for train service on January 1 as the track improvements have not been made and stations have not been built/rebuilt. Biloxi and Pascagoula still need extensive work and Mobile has absolutely no train station at all – all that is left of the old depot is just a broken-up concrete platform. The old GM&O building in Mobile could be used but that would need a new track connection to get in/out of the station and would require using CN and likely NS for part of the way. It could take a good 6-12 months to rehabilitate/build new train depots if they were to start now. Extending sidings could be another 6-12 months or so, particularly if constructing in a marsh. Any siding built would have to be at least 15,000 feet long as that is the current length of CSX trains on the coast.

Baton Rouge also got some press because the route to New Orleans showed up on a map released by Amtrak of potential additions it wants to make. The KCS has no contract with Amtrak and remains opposed to operating Amtrak on their tracks, but the KCS will likely be bought by the Canadian Pacific Railway and they are Amtrak operators (Minneapolis to Chicago) and the CP is negotiating with Amtrak to operate a second daily frequency on the route. If the sale of the KCS to the CP gets regulatory approval and it actually goes through likely our prospects will improve on the Baton Rouge train. The new railroad would be called Canadian Pacific Kansas City.

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.
- Amtrak intends to make Siemens its preferred provider of equipment both in cars and in locomotives. Siemens built Amtrak’s new Northeast Corridor trains along with new cars being used in the Midwest, and their locomotives have been used on several trains already (although none reported in New Orleans yet).
- Brightline is continuing work in Florida with construction past 50% complete, and design work is ongoing on the new route from Orlando to Tampa. There are some pretty tight deadlines for Brightline to negotiate access to the right of way, but they seem committed to the project to get it done. There is also design work going on from southern California to Las Vegas and they intend to start construction soon.
- Although Amtrak will start selling all of the seats without social distancing sometime in late May, masks will still be required until at least September (a federal mandate on all public transport).

Southern Railway’s southbound “Queen & Crescent” with 4-6-2 #6685 at Birmingham, AL in July of 1936. This was a train operated between Cincinnati and New Orleans.



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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 May 8 in person at NOUPT live or 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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