

Louisiana Association of Railroad Passengers

P.O. Box 57551 New Orleans, LA 70157
www.LARPrail.com

May-June 2021 Newsletter

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Amtrak

National Happenings

Amtrak has released its 15-year Vision, calling on Congress to invest \$75 billion in the passenger railroad. Amtrak says that for every dollar invested in passenger rail \$4 will be returned in economic benefits (with studies to back them up). Service from New Orleans to Baton Rouge and Mobile is included in this vision, as well as much expanded operations in Texas and frequent service radiating out of Atlanta in every direction. The Rail Passengers Association is reporting that money for Amtrak is in the bipartisan infrastructure bill being negotiated by Congress. The deal includes \$312 billion for transportation, including \$66 billion for passenger and freight rail, \$49 billion for public transit, \$25 billion for airports, and \$109 billion for highways and bridges. This infrastructure money would be in addition to money appropriated through the regular budget process. The bipartisan deal reportedly has support from about 20 GOP Senators, including initial support from Bill Cassidy from Louisiana. Passage of the bipartisan infrastructure deal by Congress is expected later this summer or early fall. There may also be another infrastructure bill passed using the Reconciliation process with only Democratic votes, but that remains to be seen whether that can pass Congress. Also, the Biden administration in its 2022 budget request to Congress is asking \$2.7 billion for Amtrak in next year's budget, about \$700 million more than previous years. It's likely that Congress will appropriate a budget number close to that for the coming year, assuming that there isn't a government shutdown or other budget shenanigans.

Amtrak reinstated full dining car service on its western Superliner trains, even going back to serving food on real dishes and using real glasses. Amtrak's former dining service used plastic plates and glasses and created a lot of waste, along with a recycling issue as these plastic products were going into landfills instead of recycling centers. By hiring an assistant cook/dishwasher Amtrak can stop with this environmental waste, and it actually saves them money – even with the salary of the dishwasher. Right now, the diners are open to first class passengers only but Amtrak is looking at allowing coach passengers back into the dining cars with perhaps a pre-purchased meal voucher. Amtrak is looking at rolling out those changes by year's end. The *Sunset Limited* is one of the trains with a restored dining car. In the east, there still aren't dining cars on any of those trains but Amtrak says that it is looking at bringing back dining service on those trains as well. Amtrak has not released a timeline on the restoration of dining car service with its eastern overnight trains, including the *Crescent*. One of the biggest impediments to quick restoration of dining service is that most of the employees let go in October, 2019 have found other jobs and Amtrak has to start from scratch with training new employees.

Amtrak also has been showing off upgraded Superliner cars with new seat fabric and interiors. It had been many years – even decades – since some of these cars had seen interior upgrades. The average cost will be about \$66,000 per car and includes such things as LED lighting, new leather seats, carpet, wall fabric, etc. The refurbished cars look really nice and should help to build ridership and improve customer satisfaction. All of the Superliner fleet

will be cycled through Beech Grove and some other sites like New Orleans and all of the cars should be upgraded in three years.

Crescent Schedule Change

The “Crescent” went back to daily operation on Monday, June 7th with the new, longer schedule. Timekeeping seemed to improve somewhat of trains observed and also from a check of Amtrak’s website. There were many arrivals of train 20 northbound into Washington, DC 30-40 minutes early, and train 19’s arrival into New Orleans also had a few early arrivals. The jury is still out whether or not passengers will see a long-term improvement in the train’s schedule keeping, but in passenger surveys it is very important to passengers that the trains operate on time. Related to the “Crescent,” Amtrak started selling all seats in mid-June (as opposed to the covid distancing protocol) and the train started operating with just two coaches instead of the normal three coaches.

On Time Performance

For April, on-time performance was 83.7% with long-distance at 51.8%. All railroad operators earned a grade of “A” or “B” from Amtrak concerning on time performance for the month of April. For May, on time performance was 79.6% with long distance at 42.9%. All roads again earned an “A” or “B” for March, except Norfolk Southern that declined to a grade of “C”.

Route Name	Apr21 OT%	Apr21 Delay/Rider	May21 OT%	May21 Delay/Rider
<i>CITY of New Orleans</i>	68.7%	39 minutes	76.3%	34 minutes
<i>Crescent</i>	39.9%	92 minutes	37.2%	98 minutes
<i>Sunset Limited</i>	21.7%	126 minutes	18.6%	158 minutes
<i>Texas Eagle</i>	59.3%	81 minutes	52.2%	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

Parties have lined up basically either opposing or supporting the gulf coast train. Those that are opposed are *waiting for the traffic study* that likely will never be completed. Sadly, the port of New Orleans has joined with the other ports in their opposition. Those in opposition don’t see economic benefit of considerable cruise ship trade and bringing passengers via Amtrak trains to the ships. There are also several politicians that are opposed, including Alabama’s governor Kay Ivey and Alabama GOP Senator Richard Shelby. In favor are President Biden and his administration, along with Mississippi Republican Senator Roger Wicker and Louisiana governor John Bel Edwards, along with mayors and city councils for every stop that Amtrak will serve. Mississippi governor Tate Reeves has been in favor of the train in principle and wasn’t opposed to Mississippi funding several million dollars to improve the CSX line. Amtrak has asked for an expedited ruling from the Surface Transportation Board on forcing CSX and NS to handle Amtrak trains – but as of June 30th there has been no ruling.

The Baton Rouge train has been in the news again with the CP/CN bids to buy the Kansas City Southern. At this point, it appears that the CP bid is off and the CN bid is on, but that is subject to change. CN says that if it buys the KCS that it will sell the KCS Baton Rouge line – and so Amtrak has filed another petition with the Surface Transportation Board opposing the CN buyout and basically saying that it wants that line preserved for future passenger service. It would be nice if Amtrak or the state of Louisiana stepped in and bought the line – Louisiana considered buying the line right after Hurricane Katrina with Road Home funds until that pot of money ran out. Louisiana does have billions it could potentially use for discretionary purchases such as buying a rail line for passenger service as such a change request would likely be approved by the Biden administration. We’ll have to see how this all plays out.

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.
- Union Pacific will operate its Big Boy 4-8-8-4 steam locomotive and passenger train through Louisiana in August and it will display near Audubon Park in New Orleans on Saturday, August 21st. Then on Sunday, August 22nd the UP will run an excursion with the Big Boy out of New Orleans over the Huey Long bridge to Plaquemine, LA on the old Texas & Pacific line. Tickets will start at \$650 per seat and is only one way (buses back to New Orleans). But still this will be very rare mileage as a passenger train has not operated over this line with tickets sold to the public since 1970.
- In late May, the 100-year old former Illinois Central depot at McComb, MS was burned down. It was ruled an act of arson with a person arrested for the crime. The building had recently been refurbished and contained the Amtrak waiting room space as well as a railroad museum with irreplaceable artifacts. The wood structure was nearly a total loss, but the building was fully insured and officials have said they intend to rebuild.



SLIDELL, LA - NOV 1975
© JAMES H. SELZER, JR.

Southern Railway's "Southern Crescent" northbound at Slidell, LA in November, 1975. Photo by Jim Selzer.

2021 LARP Officers

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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 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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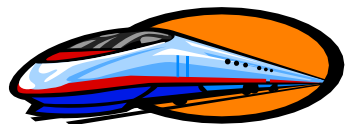
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