

Louisiana Association of Railroad Passengers

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November-December 2021 Newsletter

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Amtrak

National Happenings

The House passed the bipartisan Investment in Infrastructure and Jobs Act (IIJA) in the beginning of November. The law contains \$66 billion for passenger rail over five years with most of the funding going to Amtrak (there is a carve out of \$2.5 billion for grade crossing elimination). The expectation is that about \$30 billion will be invested in the Northeast Corridor and the balance in the national system. Amtrak's mission and Board of Directors were reformed with the passage of the bill to remove the for-profit language and to make the Board more geographically representative. The IIJA does have language about the value of the long-distance trains, but it does not remove the 750-mile provision that froze the network as it was in 2008. The reality is we won't see any meaningful expansion of nationally funded interstate trains until that requirement is repealed. However, the passage of this act is a huge step forward for passenger rail advocates that will result in expanded service in many places across the nation, including locally from New Orleans to Baton Rouge and the Gulf Coast. The funding formula is somewhat complicated, but basically Amtrak will receive about \$22 billion more than their regular appropriation over the next five years, and the remaining \$44 billion will be grants awarded by the Federal Railway Administration (FRA) to states/commissions to expand regional Amtrak services. Although the funding process has not yet been finalized, it is assumed that there will be some sort of competitive rating of projects, along with a state/local match required. And once the construction has been completed Amtrak may pay the cost of the running the new trains until some point in the future (five years) when states would be required to take over the operating costs.

Freight Railroad Problems

Several of the larger freight railroads have been having serious operational issues lately with keeping their freight trains moving, and these problems have had a negative impact on Amtrak timekeeping. Railroads were quick to lay off employees during the pandemic to keep costs down, but when business picked up again they had difficulty rehiring employees again. These same big railroad companies rank near the bottom of the worst employers to work for, making the hiring process even more difficult. Furthermore, these same railroads recently adopted business plans that radically cut costs/sell off assets, resulting in huge freights that are so long that they exceed length of sidings. When Amtrak meets these excessively long freight trains, Amtrak must take the siding, and the freight has to move forward/reverse for Amtrak to pass on the siding. Railroads have made it abundantly clear that they will not invest in infrastructure to improve Amtrak service, but these corporations have not been investing in infrastructure to even keep their own trains moving in a fluid manner. The reality is that railroads are not operated in the public interest, and they're not even operated in the interest of their biggest shipping customers – literally the only interest the railroads have is to increase shareholder wealth. Railroad management's primary concern to ward off corporate raiders – so they strive to keep the operating ratio (expenses to revenue ratio) at 60% or even lower to

keep their biggest shareholders happy. If railroads park freights or delay shipments by days/weeks, those poor results are obviously acceptable to them as long as the operating ratio is kept low. Railroad service has gotten so bad that they are inviting the federal government to regulate them again.

On Time Performance

For October, on-time performance was 77.0% with long-distance at 52.3%. Most railroad operators earned a grade of “A” or “B” from Amtrak concerning on time performance for the month of August except for Union Pacific and Norfolk Southern with a “D.” For November, on time performance was 76.9% with long distance at 55.4%. Most roads again earned an “A” or “B” for November, except Union Pacific with “C” and Norfolk Southern a “F”.

Route Name	Oct21 OT%	Oct21 Delay/Rider	Nov21 OT%	Nov21 Delay/Rider
<i>CITY of New Orleans</i>	69.8%	74 minutes	76.2%	82 minutes
<i>Crescent</i>	65.7%	70 minutes	52.2%	104 minutes
<i>Sunset Limited</i>	21.1%	153 minutes	22.7%	96 minutes
<i>Texas Eagle</i>	42.5%	86 minutes	67.9%	69 minutes

The *City of New Orleans* did ok both months, but not spectacular. The *Crescent* did ok in October but was significantly worse in November. The *Sunset Limited* performance was again awful, and the *Texas Eagle* was not much better. On time performance is for end point stations, and minutes of delay is the average minutes late per late rider.

Gulf Coast Restoration

A decision by the Surface Transportation Board (STB) on the Gulf Coast Amtrak service has been delayed until early next year, and the result will be that the reinstatement of Amtrak service to Mobile will not happen on January 1, 2022 like Amtrak had planned. The Southern Rail Commission did announce large grants for the stations of Bay St. Louis, Gulfport, and Pascagoula – but not Mobile. Mobile currently has no viable train station at all, so something will have to be built or a temporary facility installed. Amtrak is asking the STB to order NS and CSX to run their trains, and then to make incremental upgrades to railroad infrastructure afterward. Amtrak intends on operating two frequencies per day, one in the morning and afternoon in both directions. There are long stretches of single track on the CSX with currently a lack of appropriate sidings, and CSX is currently operating freight trains that exceed the length of the existing sidings.

Baton Rouge Train

The Baton Rouge train was thrust into the spotlight in discussions of the pending purchase of the Kansas City Southern Railway by the Canadian Pacific. A Canadian Pacific’s spokesperson was quoted as saying that the new combined railroad would cooperate with putting on Amtrak service from New Orleans to Baton Rouge, and even offered to allow Amtrak to start service with one round trip per day before upgrades are made. The Louisiana DOT&D is making a formal application for funding from the Investment in Infrastructure and Jobs Act. Canadian Pacific has a good working relationship with Amtrak and operates the *Empire Builder* train between Chicago and Minneapolis as well as several daily Chicago-Milwaukee corridor trains. The CP has one of the best on time performance records of any railroad operating Amtrak trains in the U.S., and the railroad is also cooperating with the states of Wisconsin and Minnesota to reinstate a second daily frequency between Chicago and Minneapolis. The previous railroad owner of the Baton Rouge line (KCS) had developed a policy against operating any commercial passenger service over its lines, so having a cooperative railroad now in charge of that line will be of great value. Once the \$300+ million capital financing comes into place on the federal and state level, progress should be able to move forward relatively quickly. LARP has been advocating for a New Orleans to Baton Rouge train since 1980 and we have experienced numerous near misses, but this time we have the political will and the financing available to make the trains a reality.

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.
- The Amtrak Board has appointed Stephen Gardner as the new CEO effective March, 2022 when the current CEO Bill Flynn retires. Concerning the Board, all six member terms have expired, and they are serving only until the Biden administration nominates their replacements (and they are approved by the Senate).
- Amtrak has restored dining cars to the consists of some eastern trains, but still hasn’t restored full meal service on those trains. Currently first-class passengers only are being served “flexible dining” meals in the diner, but not table service like trains in the west. Strangely enough, the *Crescent* isn’t one of the trains with a diner in the consist with first class passengers served either in the lounge car or in their rooms. Amtrak expects to restore full dining car service on the eastern overnight trains sometime in mid-2022.
- LARP’s election of officers will be at the next meeting on January 8, 2022. The same slate of officers from 2021 has been nominated for 2022.



Southern Railway’s *Southern Crescent* on the Lake Pontchartrain trestle northbound in March, 1978. This spectacular photo is by LARP friend Jim Selzer.

2021 LARP Officers

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

Dues are payable January 1, 2022.

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 in the second floor conference room Saturday, January 8, 2022 at 10:00 a.m., and also via Zoom.** If you would like to join in on Zoom please send an email to jsitajr@gmail.com.



LARP Membership Application

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

Name _____

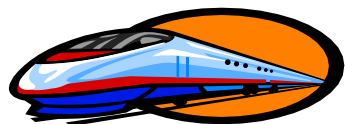
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☐ I can work actively for LARP. Please contact me.

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