

Louisiana Association of Railroad Passengers

P.O. Box 57551 New Orleans, LA 70157
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September-October 2021 Newsletter

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Amtrak

National Happenings

As of late October, Amtrak is being funded by a Continuing Resolution (CR) for \$2 billion prorated as no budgets were passed for the start of the fiscal year on October 1. The CR avoided a government shutdown and runs through December 3rd, the day when the government again faces another shutdown. There are proposals to increase Amtrak's funding to around \$2.7 billion via the regular budget process, a \$700 million increase over what the company has normally received. But of course, budgets will have to be passed by Congress for Amtrak actually to see the increase. Even in a highly partisan environment, Amtrak does enjoy relatively strong bipartisan support.

Also, as of late October, the infrastructure bills have not yet passed Congress. It's believed that the so-called bipartisan infrastructure bill that contains \$66 billion for passenger rail (including \$22 billion for Amtrak) will eventually pass the House with Democratic only votes and it was hoped it would pass by the end of October. The so-called bipartisan bill attracted 19 Republican Senators to vote for its Senate passage (including Louisiana's Bill Cassidy) but it doesn't appear that there will be any Republican House members will support the infrastructure spending. However, Democrats in the House have also tied the bipartisan bill that contains the hard infrastructure funding (including Amtrak) to the Democratic-only Reconciliation bill containing social spending. There are about 30 progressive Democrats in the House that are withholding their support for the bipartisan bill until Senate Democrats finalize what they will accept in social spending. It appeared that both House and Senate Democrats were close to an agreement after President Biden inserted himself into negotiations, but still no deal. The reauthorization of the FAST Act (funding all transportation) is included in the bipartisan bill, so highway funding had to be extended to keep these programs from shutting down. And the latest is that the Reconciliation bill has \$10 billion more in high-speed rail funding.

Although Amtrak did reinstate daily service on most routes in July, several trains have been operating with reduced consists due to labor shortages. The *Crescent* operated with just two coaches for about three months until the first week of October when the third coach was finally added. Amtrak said that it didn't have the available cars to properly equip the trains, but another issue that has arisen is a labor shortage (labor being a primary reason dining car service hasn't yet been restored in the East). Like most other businesses, Amtrak barely has enough employees to operate their trains daily with the problem being especially acute with locomotive engineers. Also, the coming vaccine mandate will require all employees to be vaccinated for covid by December, so a maximum of 20% unvaccinated employees may have to separate from the company at that time. Unless Amtrak can get more of its employees to get vaccinated, Amtrak may be forced to reduce the frequencies of the trains again to tri weekly. Amtrak brought some of these labor problems on themselves by cutting dining car staffing back in 2019, and then by cutting frequencies and staffing last year during the pandemic. Employees that have been laid off are not going

to sit around and remain unemployed waiting on Amtrak to finally recall them to work. Let's hope that Amtrak doesn't have to make frequency cuts and will be able to maintain daily service.

New Equipment

Amtrak intends to replace all of the Amfleet cars with the Bipartisan Infrastructure money, including those in use on the Northeast Corridor as well as throughout the East on long-distance trains. The Amfleet II cars currently in use date back to the mid-1970s and are tired. Amtrak will likely use Siemens coaches like the ones being purchased for Midwest corridor service, except set up for long-distance travel with leg rests.

On Time Performance

For August, on-time performance was 77.4% with long-distance at 50.6%. Railroad operators earned a grade of "A" or "B" from Amtrak concerning on time performance for the month of August except for Union Pacific with a "D" and Norfolk Southern "F." For September, on time performance was 76.7% with long distance at 55.9%. All roads again earned an "A" or "B" for September, except Union Pacific with "C" and Norfolk Southern a "D".

Route Name	Aug21 OT%	Apr21 Delay/Rider	Sep21 OT%	Sep21 Delay/Rider
<i>CITY of New Orleans</i>	91.7%	35 minutes	89.1%	35 minutes
<i>Crescent</i>	64.8%	75 minutes	74.5%	62 minutes
<i>Sunset Limited</i>	13.3%	163 minutes	36.5%	99 minutes
<i>Texas Eagle</i>	36.2%	87 minutes	61.1%	84 minutes

The *City of New Orleans* did well both months, the best of all long-distance trains. The *Crescent* did much better with endpoint timekeeping than before the two hours of additional schedule time was added. The *Sunset Limited* performance was 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/Baton Rouge

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 start 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.

The merger of the Kansas City Southern with the Canadian National Railway is officially off, and the merger between KCS and the Canadian Pacific is back on. The CN had planned on selling the KCS line from Baton Rouge to New Orleans as they already have the ex-IC line in that corridor, but now that the CP will get control they plan to keep the line. The CP has been one of the better operators of Amtrak service (they operate Chicago and Minneapolis and Chicago-Milwaukee corridor trains). They are also cooperating with the states of Wisconsin and Minnesota to reinstate a second daily frequency between Chicago and Minneapolis, so having a cooperative railroad in the effort to reinstate train service between New Orleans and Baton Rouge will be of great value. Once the capital financing comes into place on the federal and state level, a railroad hostile to passenger service should be a thing of the past. And Baton Rouge does show up on Amtrak maps of service they want to restore with the infrastructure money.



L&N's "Hummingbird" at Mobile in November, 1968. Photo by Ron Flanary.

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.
- Brightline intends to reinstate passenger service between Miami and West Palm Beach on November 8 with the full complement of frequencies it was operating before the pandemic. Brightline also plans to operate a shuttle service to/from depots to transport passengers to their final destination (within limits). Full service to Orlando is likely a year away.
- Hurricane Ida knocked out Amtrak service on the *Crescent* and *Sunset Limited* routes in/out of New Orleans for about one week, but the *City of New Orleans* took about three weeks for service to be restored due to numerous washouts on the CN Railroad near Lake Pontchartrain.
- The Polar Express train out of New Orleans will not operate this Christmas season. The company cited hurricane damage at NOUPT (that was minimal) and covid for not running this year.

2021 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 at NOUPT in the second floor conference room Saturday, November 13, 2021 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

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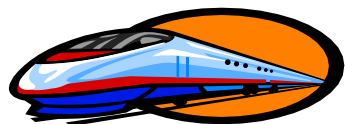
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