

Louisiana Association of Railroad Passengers

P.O. Box 57551 New Orleans, LA 70157

March-April 2022 Newsletter

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Amtrak

National Happenings

In mid-March, Congress finally passed an Omnibus funding bill for the rest of the fiscal year through September 2022. In addition to what Amtrak has received in the IIJA Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill, Amtrak received \$2.3 billion, plus about another \$700 million more in grants to enhance passenger rail projects. Amtrak is authorized yearly at \$4.48 billion over the next five years and received little more than half of that in appropriations. Not receiving authorized level in appropriations is normal for government agencies (except for Defense), and \$2.3 billion is on par with what they have received in previous years. Remember this is in addition to the yearly IIJA funding of about \$4.5 billion in direct appropriations.

Amtrak is finally talking about ordering new equipment for the long-distance fleet. Amtrak's new head of long distance Larry Chestler gave details of Amtrak's plans at NARP's April Board meeting, but it won't be a quick process. Amtrak doesn't even plan to request bids until a full year from now and they are still accessing their equipment needs. If the request for bids are released in 2023 and orders placed in the same year, it could be another two or three years after that until cars start to be delivered. One would think that after all of these years that Amtrak would have a car order ready to go, but they are just now accessing their needs. If the national network trains are to be an ongoing concern and Amtrak continues using bilevel cars for long distance, it shouldn't be a difficult process to start ordering revenue cars like coaches and sleepers.

Frequency Cuts to Last Through the Summer

When Amtrak cut the frequencies of most long-distance trains in February, they were planning on reinstating daily service by late-May, but they are not going to make their self-imposed deadline. While most trains got restored, the *Crescent* and *City of New Orleans* remain at five-days-a-week, and the New York to Miami *Silver Meteor* remains suspended entirely all until September 11, 2022. The *City of New Orleans* doesn't originate from its initial terminals on Saturdays-Sundays and the *Crescent* on Tuesdays-Wednesdays. Amtrak has not completely solved its problems that led them to cut frequencies in the first place, namely the lack of qualified employees and the lack of serviceable equipment. Amtrak has been hiring people but, in a check mid-April of Amtrak's open jobs at New Orleans, 24 jobs were still open from back shop and coach cleaners to conductors to onboard service positions. And then the lack of equipment is an issue also with the *Crescent* and *Silver Meteor* and the Amfleet II coaches. Amtrak has had cascading problems with equipment starting in the pacific northwest with the sudden withdrawal of the Talgos with Horizon coaches from the Midwest being used to replace them. And then the new Venture cars in the Midwest had problems again and had to be withdrawn with Amfleet II coaches used to equip these state-contracted services. With the Amfleet coaches being used in the Midwest there aren't enough of these coaches available to restore all of the eastern services.

On Time Performance

For February, on-time performance was 76.3% with long-distance at 50.4%. Most railroad operators earned a grade of “A” or “B” from Amtrak concerning on time performance for the month of February except for Union Pacific with a “D” and Norfolk Southern with an off-the-charts “F.” For March, on time performance was 77.5% with long distance at 44.0%. Most roads again earned an “A” or “B” for January, except Union Pacific again with “D” and Norfolk Southern again with a big “F”.

Route Name	Feb22 OT%	Dec21 Delay/Rider	Mar22 OT%	Jan22 Delay/Rider
<i>CITY of New Orleans</i>	52.1%	75 minutes	50.3%	109 minutes
<i>Crescent</i>	56.9%	65 minutes	51.5%	79 minutes
<i>Sunset Limited</i>	26.1%	148 minutes	16.3%	150 minutes
<i>Texas Eagle</i>	59.8%	61 minutes	48.4%	91 minutes

The *CITY of New Orleans* again didn’t do well both months – usually its on time performance is much better. Giving the *Crescent* two hours more of scheduled running time really didn’t help timekeeping much, and the *Sunset Limited* was awful. It really seems that timekeeping is getting worse across the board with railroad service melting down.

Gulf Coast Restoration

The Surface Transportation Board (STB) has been holding hearings on Gulf Coast Amtrak service pretty much all of April without resolution, and it looks like the hearings will go well into May. The main issues the STB has to wade through are how much the infrastructure upgrades will cost, how much rail congestion is tolerable, is Amtrak being too aggressive or are the railroads stalling too much, and the national implications of an order to the railroads to operate this Amtrak service. It’s hard to say definitely how the STB will rule, but the likely outcome is going to be a ruling in favor of Amtrak, and if that happens the railroads may try to appeal the adverse decision in court. There really isn’t a lot of wisdom in taking their regulator to court, but then the railroads really haven’t been behaving in a prudent manner for the past several years anyway. The reality is that even if the STB rules in Amtrak’s favor and orders NS/CSX to operate the two daily Amtrak trains immediately, Amtrak is not ready to operate service. The stations aren’t ready (Mobile has none), and the same hiring impediments affecting Amtrak’s national system will affect this service as well. If Amtrak can’t even operate a daily *City of New Orleans* and *Crescent* because of a lack of workers and a lack of equipment, how can they operate this new additional service?

Baton Rouge/Shreveport to Meridian Train

In late April, Amtrak operated an inspection train over the KCS tracks from Baton Rouge to New Orleans using KCS’s beautiful Southern Belle business train. Louisiana Governor Edwards was on board with LADOT&D head Shawn Wilson, as well as KCS and Canadian Pacific Railroad officials, Amtrak officials, and FRA officials. While this is an exciting development, this is not the first time an inspection train has been operated. However, this time we have three positive things in favor of restoration of service – a cooperative railroad, political will, and money. Over the years we’ve had some of these elements in place but never all three at the same time. While the CP Railroad is offering to start service basically right away without upgrades, it would be better to get the infrastructure in place in order to operate the most expeditious and competitive rail service possible. The route has congested spots and slow orders that need to be addressed in order to achieve the planned 90-minute running time. And the start of service will still be hampered by the lack of qualified employees and the lack of equipment. The possibilities are endless in what can be done, and it would be kind of cool if the Baton Rouge and Mobile trains could be operated as one through service.

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. LARP’s website is down – in fact, it has disappeared. If you are looking to pay your dues, please use the old-fashioned way and mail in your check to the post office box. We are in the process of having a new site built, but we’re not sure when it will be completed.
- In late April the Surface Transportation Board took a break from the Amtrak Gulf Coast hearings to discuss the meltdown in freight rail service and the lack of progress the railroads have made in recovering to pre-pandemic service levels. The railroads have nearly all embraced “precision scheduled railroading” designed to shed assets, cut expenses, and enrich shareholders, and service has really suffered as a result. It appears the railroads simply don’t know how to solve their problems - one freight rail executive even commented that going to one-person crews could solve all their labor shortage problems. It’s no wonder that Amtrak’s timekeeping has degenerated so badly with these CEOs running railroad corporations.



L&N’s southbound *Pan American* with two E-7 locomotives and 12 cars doing 70 mph in Kentucky on its way to New Orleans in July, 1962. Photo by Ron Flanary.

2022 LARP Officers

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Dues were 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, May 7, 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

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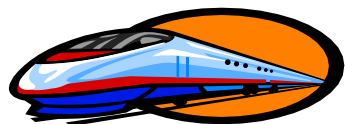
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