

Louisiana Association of Railroad Passengers

P.O. Box 57551 New Orleans, LA 70157

www.LARPrail.com

May-June 2022 Newsletter

John Sita, Jr.—Editor

jsitajr@gmail.com

Amtrak

National Happenings

Despite the massive infusion of cash through the IIJA Infrastructure bill, Amtrak is still struggling to function as a national entity. Many of the trains remain less than daily, including the *CITY of New Orleans* and *Crescent*, and will remain less than daily until at least September. Capacity is far from what it normally has been during the peak summer travel season with entire sleeping car and coach lines not available. The *Crescent* operates with only three coaches instead of the four (or five) prior to covid. There is no time frame to restore dining car service in the east or to allow coach passengers to use the diner in the west, and the *Crescent* still does not have a dining car in the consist like other eastern trains. The *Silver Meteor* from New York to Florida is still suspended and will likely remain so until at least August. Amtrak's problems are mainly due to a lack of available labor, but Amtrak brought many of these problems upon themselves with previous cost cutting via job reductions/consolidations and buyouts. With gas prices well above \$4/gallon Amtrak should be filling a real need for transportation nationwide, but they are simply not prepared or ready to meet that need.

The Biden administration nominated five directors for Amtrak's Board, and most of the nominees are disappointing (to put it mildly). They renominated one Board member that helped previous management put into place some of Amtrak's anti-long distance moves over the past several years. Most of the other nominees seem to be curious picks with little/no experience in relation to Amtrak or railroads. Only one new nominee out of five is properly qualified to represent the national network. These picks are mostly corridor-centric and not representative of the nation as required by the IIJA Infrastructure law, and the Administration that considers itself pro-Amtrak should have chosen better nominees. The Biden administration could have chosen to pick nominees from the rail advocacy community with a national focus. The Republicans have the option to pick three more Directors, and it's possible the GOP could choose better directors with more national focus than what the Biden administration has. However, the Republicans have previously told the Administration that they won't confirm any more of President Biden's nominations, so they likely won't do anything with the Amtrak Board at all (subject to change).

The freight railroads are in full blown meltdown with embargoes against customers because of their inability to handle their freight business. It's hard to say exactly, but the railroads might be moving only 70-75% of the freight they handled before the pandemic, and all the asset stripping and employee reductions didn't do them any favors during the past couple of years. Railroads that adopted the "precision scheduled railroad" model have been focused on enriching stockholders and have not been properly investing for the future. Capital budgets have been cut to the bone with hardly any expansion of capacity or attempts to capture a bigger market share of freight. The railroad meltdown negatively impacts Amtrak – if the freights can't move their own trains, then they certainly won't be able to expedite Amtrak trains. It should be no surprise that Amtrak's on-time performance has gotten so bad.

On Time Performance

For April, on-time performance was 79.5% with long-distance at 44.0%. CP, BNSF, and CSX earned a grade of ‘A’ or ‘B’ grade, CN a ‘C’, UP a ‘D’, and NS an ‘F.’ For May, on time performance was 75.4% with long distance at just 38.0%. The grades for the railroads for May were the same as for April.

Route Name	Apr22 OT%	Apr22 Delay/Rider	May22 OT%	May22 Delay/Rider
<i>CITY of New Orleans</i>	51.0%	59 minutes	49.3%	54 minutes
<i>Crescent</i>	45.2%	85 minutes	33.0%	98 minutes
<i>Sunset Limited</i>	10.4%	186 minutes	14.4%	186 minutes
<i>Texas Eagle</i>	43.7%	98 minutes	40.3%	102 minutes

On-time performance has gotten significantly worse and has been trending downward, even though these trains are operating with padded schedules and are in some cases as slow as what was operated in the 1930s.

Gulf Coast Restoration

The Surface Transportation Board (STB) has ordered mediation with the freight railroads and Amtrak concerning the gulf coast service. What this means is that the railroads must share their confidential information with Amtrak concerning freight movements and the basis for their infrastructure needs. The two sides are still far apart by about \$350 million, but the STB has not backed away completely from the issue. The mediator appointed by the STB should be able to determine the amount of infrastructure needed – so this should expedite the process and be a win for rail passengers. What will likely be the result is a compromise figure lower than what the freights want and higher than what Amtrak and the Southern Rail Commission think is necessary. There still is no significant movement to upgrade depots (or build new in the case of Mobile), and Amtrak’s labor problems would also affect service here. Even if the STB were to order CSX operate Amtrak trains immediately, the reality is that Amtrak wouldn’t be prepared in the short term to operate service.

Baton Rouge/Shreveport to Meridian Train

There is no recent news about the Baton Rouge or Shreveport-Meridian trains. The STB has yet to approve the Canadian Pacific purchase of the Kansas City Southern, but it is likely they will approve of the merger. Louisiana has made an application for some of the IIA Infrastructure money to upgrade the route for passenger service, and CP has offered to operate one round trip per day to Baton Rouge without upgrades. If Amtrak were to take CP’s offer, speeds would likely be limited to no more than 60 mph with many slow orders – resulting in a long running time of two hours or more. There is also a similar problem with the gulf coast in that no stations exist except for New Orleans. The plan is to build the Baton Rouge depot near Government Street (the KCS used to have its depot there years ago).

With Meridian to Shreveport, Canadian Pacific has agreed to study the resumption of passenger service, although that study has yet to be completed (or likely even started at this point). The track infrastructure is generally good for 60 mph freights, but the mostly single-track line is very busy and at capacity. Since passenger service has not been operated on this line since 1968 by the Illinois Central, no passenger infrastructure remains in place. Except for Meridian and Jackson, no other depots exist. Shreveport had a nice, centrally located Union Station (used by Illinois Central and Kansas City Southern) but it burned down about 1970 and was razed – although the land may still be available to build a new depot. The old Illinois Central depot in Vicksburg is now a museum. If the train was extended west to Dallas, infrastructure upgrades would also be required from Shreveport to Marshall (not a current Amtrak route), as well as the current *Texas Eagle* route into Dallas. Reinstating passenger service on this line is going to require a significant investment of capital, but it will be well worth it.

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 back with full functionality to be restored soon. One of our members has built the new website from scratch, and we were able to find a company that will host our site on quite reasonable terms.
- Brightline is nearly complete on its Orlando extension (about 80%). Their plan is to build a single-track main line from Cocoa into the Orlando Airport capable of 125-mph speeds, but all bridges/tunnels have been built to accommodate two tracks for future growth. Passenger service may start either late this year or early next year. With the Tampa extension, Disney had planned to help build a depot on its land near Disney Springs in Orlando but now has backed out of the deal. Brightline planned to route its Tampa extension through Orlando to include other theme parks in the area, and Brightline still plans to build a downtown depot centrally located near Disney Springs.
- Texas Central, the high-speed project between Houston and Dallas, won a victory in the Texas Supreme Court by winning the right to eminent domain when acquiring the right of way to build their route. However, there hasn’t been a lot of recent movement with the Texas Central project. Brightline has also expressed interest in this corridor (as well as Amtrak) and perhaps there will be multiple companies vying to build from Houston to Dallas.



L&N train #33, the combined *Pan American/Piedmont Limited*, departing Montgomery, AL about 1960. Photo by Ron Flanary.

2022 LARP Officers

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

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, July 9, 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 _____

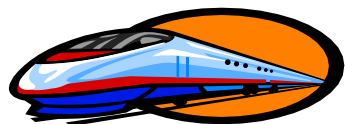
Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Phone _____ Email _____

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

MAIL TO: Louisiana Association of Railroad Passengers
 P.O. Box 57551
 New Orleans, LA 70157



Louisiana Association of Railroad Passengers

P.O. Box 57551 New Orleans, LA 70157

Address Service
Requested