

# Louisiana Association of Railroad Passengers

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[www.LARPrail.com](http://www.LARPrail.com)

## November-December 2022 Newsletter

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### Amtrak

#### National Happenings

In late December Congress passed a massive Omnibus spending bill through the entirety of the fiscal year ending next September. Amtrak received \$2.45 billion for FY23, or about \$121 million more than they received in FY22. Like with the passage of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL), there was language in the Omnibus about protecting the long-distance trains from discontinuance or downgrade. The \$2.45 billion is in addition to what Amtrak has received in the BIL.

Concerning the BIL, it's been a full year since the law passed, and so far, Amtrak really doesn't have much to show for it. Amtrak has yet to commence rebuilding parked Superliner cars, leaving the trains critically short of cars. It's not like Amtrak lacks the funds to overhaul all of the parked cars. While it's true that passenger counts dropped severely during the pandemic, Amtrak knew (or should have known) that the pandemic wouldn't last forever and that passengers would eventually return. Also keep in mind that Amtrak received \$2.7 billion in supplemental funding during the pandemic, but management chose to cut service and park cars anyway.

Concerning a new car order, according to Amtrak it won't happen until 2024, and it will take them a full year from now to even determine what kinds of cars to order and invite vendors to bid. Amtrak has talked about a substantial order for new cars for the national system for at least ten years, but except for Viewliner sleepers and diners (parked since 2019) in the east and baggage cars Amtrak has done nothing to replace its aging fleet. The cars used in regular revenue service date back to the 1970s and are nearly 50 years old. Amtrak should have had a new car order ready to go shortly after passage of the BIL, and should not have parked cars without a plan to rebuild them.

Food service still remains a big problem with Amtrak. Regular coach passengers still cannot eat in the dining cars on any of the trains. Then sometime in October, the cross-country café disappeared from the *CITY of New Orleans*, leaving only the lounge car to provide food for all passengers. The cross-country café wasn't as good as a traditional dining car, but it was better than nothing. Now there is nothing. Sleeping car passengers are fed in their rooms with a bag of food prepared by the sleeping car attendant and lead service attendant in the bottom level of the lounge car. The sightseer lounge car really isn't equipped or designed to feed full-service meals to a large number of people. Coach passengers have to wait for the first-class passengers to get their meals before they can purchase food. Back in the 1970s and 80s the train had the nickname "chicken bone" because passengers brought their own food onboard because of the lack of options onboard the train. It would seem those days are returning. With the *Crescent* the dining car still has not returned, and according to Amtrak they have no plan to bring it back. There were rumors that Amtrak was training new personnel in order to restore dining car service to the *Crescent*, but management confirmed there was, "no plan." Amtrak may bring back dining cars on the *Silver Meteor* and *Silver Star* sometime in the Spring (for first class passengers only), but not the *Crescent*.

The Senate recently approved all of President Biden's nominees to the Amtrak Board. Several of them had questionable experience and backgrounds, but Senator Jerry Moran (R-KS) got a commitment from them all on their support for the national system. He also told them he would hold them accountable if their support wavered.

## On Time Performance

For October, on-time performance was 72.9% with long-distance at 48.2%. CP earned a grade of 'A' grade, BNSF-CSX-CN-NS a 'B', and UP an 'F.' For November, on time performance was 75.2% with long distance at 49.3%. For November CP earned a grade of 'A' grade, BNSF-CSX-CN-NS a 'B', and UP an 'D.'

Route Name	Oct22 OT%	Oct22 Delay/Rider	Nov22 OT%	Nov22 Delay/Rider
<i>CITY of New Orleans</i>	56.4%	78 minutes	74.0%	51 minutes
<i>Crescent</i>	69.2%	70 minutes	65.2%	52 minutes
<i>Sunset Limited</i>	12.1%	169 minutes	21.7%	96 minutes
<i>Texas Eagle</i>	34.8%	95 minutes	48.9%	81 minutes

Amtrak measures on-time performance with a 15-minute scale over an entire route with all stations considered.

Amtrak has asked the Surface Transportation Board to investigate the Union Pacific over its handling of the *Sunset Limited*. The *Sunset Limited* had serious issues with freight interference from its host railroads, and the train was by far the worst train in the national system as far as on-time performance. The STB filing was made in early December and the train seemed to improve in timekeeping immediately after the filing was made. The *Crescent* continued its dramatic improvement reaching nearly 70% ontime, the best it's been in many years.

## Gulf Coast Restoration

There is finally an agreement between Amtrak and the railroads (CSX and NS) and the port of Mobile to reinstate Amtrak service from New Orleans to Mobile. The details are still somewhat sketchy, but it appears that the deal will require \$225+ million in infrastructure upgrades that will take two years to complete. Amtrak intends to start service in 2023, so the twice daily Amtrak service will start before the upgrades are complete and perhaps even before they are started. The stations of Bay St. Louis, Gulfport, Biloxi, and Pascagoula have either upgraded their stations/platforms or are in the process of completing these upgrades. Amtrak intends to bring in a temporary building on the site of the old L&N depot on government street and use the old existing platform (it will need extensive repairs) while a new depot is built on a site yet to be determined. The schedule will be a 3 hour 25 minute running time once the upgrades are complete. Keep in mind that the communities on the gulf coast have many at-grade crossings and have imposed speed restrictions on train movements, and these obstacles will have to be overcome before there is a significant increase in speeds. The shortage of equipment would seem to be a problem to operating new trains, and it's hard to imagine how Amtrak can operate a new service when they can barely operate what they have now.

## Baton Rouge/Shreveport to Meridian Train

The state has applied for federal funds from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to replace the old L&A bridge over the Bonnet Carre Spillway. The bridge is speed restricted to 10-mph and is a real impediment to the reinstatement of passenger service. The track is in generally decent shape with welded rail, but there is significant industrial congestion around petrochemical plants that will need to be remedied, along with numerous at-grade crossings that will need improvement. Passenger service ended between New Orleans and Baton Rouge in November, 1969.

Louisiana is pushing forward on the Shreveport to Meridian train, part of the updated rail plan developed by the LADOT&D. The plan years ago was to split the "Crescent" at Meridian with one section to New Orleans and the

other to Dallas, but the recent talk has been of a stand-alone train from Atlanta to Dallas. The route has support in Mississippi with several potential online cities endorsing passenger rail service (Vicksburg is the latest to do so). Mississippi Senators Wicker and Hyde-Smith are supporters, as well as Senator Bill Cassidy of Louisiana. Online cities in Texas have also expressed interest. There is not yet any formal request for funding, but the next step will be a comprehensive study to determine the infrastructure needs required. The Canadian Pacific says they are willing to host Amtrak trains on the route once the track upgrades are identified (and completed). As of yet the route study on infrastructure needs has not been started, and the goal is to eventually operate two frequencies per day. Passenger service ended on this route in 1968.

## 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.
- LARP’s website is now back up and operating. News can be posted, and plans are to set up an email list where members can be quickly contacted. Dues can also be quickly and safely paid on the website.
- Brightline opened up a couple of new stations in south Florida, one in Aventura and the other in Boca Raton. The work to double track the line north of West Palm Beach and the new track west of Cocoa is nearly complete (about 80% or so), and the company intends on launching service to Orlando in the Fall of 2023.



RRPictureArchives.NET Image Contributed by Michael Palmieri

The *Sunset Limited* in March, 1971 at Central Avenue in Metarie just before Amtrak took over operations that following May. The train had been tri-weekly since the previous October and has been that way ever since. Photo by Jim Selzer.

## 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 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 be at NOUPT in the second-floor conference room Saturday, January 14, 2023, 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](mailto:jsitajr@gmail.com).



### LARP Membership Application

Single member \$20     Family Member \$30

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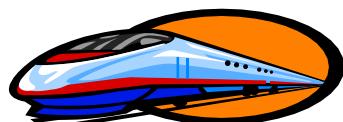
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