

Louisiana Association of Railroad Passengers

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www.LARPrail.com

January-February 2023 Newsletter

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Amtrak

National Happenings

From the fiscal Omnibus bill that passed late last year, Amtrak's appropriation is \$2.453 billion, or about \$121 million more than last year. Amtrak is to restore a station agent to all that had one prior to 2018, and continue to brief Congress on food/beverage operations and the impact of Covid on revenues. All contracts for customer service, professional, and IT services are to be performed within the United States. The NEC's share of the appropriation is much larger than last year, receiving 51% vs. 49% for the national system (37% and 63% for the previous year).

The Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) is \$535 million, \$100 million less than last year. The CRISI funds new routes and increased frequencies on existing routes and operates outside of Amtrak's budget. The CRISI is how the Gulf Coast route has received funding in the past and the program is now being asked to fund the \$179 million in gulf coast route upgrades. All of the Federal Railway Administration (FRA) programs were funded with slight increases from last year. The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) received \$13.63 billion, a 2% increase over last year. New rail starts out of this amount is \$1.77 billion. It would be nice if Jefferson/Orleans parishes asked for funding for light rail from NOUPT to the Louis Armstrong airport, but there has been no initiative made to build this route.

Some highlights from Amtrak's December Board meeting: there is no plan to reintroduce paper train schedules; there is a plan to refresh 400+ Superliners and 50 Viewliner sleeping cars; there is no plan to re-enter into the (potentially multi-billion dollar) package express business; management bonuses have been based on controlling expenses and not revenue growth; route expansion is only focused on short-distance routes, and the company is leaving mandated studies of new long distance services to the FRA; long-distance cars will be redeployed back to the long-distance trains once the Venture cars have been fully delivered; it will take Amtrak well into FY24 (September 2024) to overhaul backlogged Superliner cars, assuming there is a large increase in production over what's happening now; when Amtrak parked cars during the covid pandemic they postponed all overhaul work; 11 wrecked Superliner cars are in a legal hold status, and 18 more are expected to be repairable; coach passengers will have limited access to dining cars on a fixed priced schedule; Amtrak will explore restoring service to the Florida panhandle only with the state of Florida's financial support; there may be a move from the Hialeah depot into the state of Florida's new Miami Intermodal Center in 2023; there should be a (second) Chicago to Minneapolis train this year, along with the new service on the gulf coast; there is a long-term maintenance agreement with Siemens that includes financial consequences for locomotive failures; all options are on the table to utilize current equipment for as long as possible until new equipment is delivered.

On Time Performance

For December, on-time performance was 74.9% with long-distance at 51.4%. CP and CSX earned a grade of ‘A’, BNSF-CN-NS a ‘B’, and UP a ‘C.’ For January, on time performance was 80.2% with long distance at 56.3%. For January CP earned a grade of ‘A’, BNSF-CSX-CN-NS a ‘B’, and UP a ‘D.’

Route Name	Dec22 OT%	Dec22 Delay/Rider	Jan23 OT%	Jan23 Delay/Rider
<i>CITY of New Orleans</i>	66.9%	122 minutes	73.6%	74 minutes
<i>Crescent</i>	65.4%	80 minutes	71.3%	63 minutes
<i>Sunset Limited</i>	24.1%	121 minutes	39.2%	92 minutes
<i>Texas Eagle</i>	58.1%	99 minutes	72.4%	72 minutes

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

Since Amtrak has asked the Surface Transportation Board to investigate Union Pacific over its handling of the *Sunset Limited*, the train started improving and even arrived at endpoints early. The real metric to watch is delay/rider and those all came down significantly in January compared to where it had been.

Gulf Coast Restoration

Amtrak started operating test trains in February between New Orleans and Mobile to train operating crews. The consist has generally been an ALC-42 locomotive on each end of one Horizon coach car. Except for Mobile, the (temporary) platforms are ready to go. The platforms have a ramp that will allow wheelchair access and a lift to get wheelchairs into the cars. The platforms look somewhat like the same aluminum material one might find in outdoor stadium seats. At this point it doesn’t appear that passengers will (at least initially) have access to the station buildings as Bay St. Louis and Gulfport are active museums that are only open certain days and hours. The old Louisville & Nashville Railroad (L&N) Pascagoula building is still standing and appears to be unused, but it likely won’t be ready for the startup of service. Biloxi has nothing but a parking lot and the temp platform – the original classic L&N depot was torn down many years ago and replaced by the L&N in the 1960s with a white metal building. The white metal building is gone now too, but the remnants of the platform shelter are still standing. After the L&N quit passenger service the Biloxi depot served as a bus station for a while, and it was likely seriously damaged by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Mobile is like Biloxi with absolutely nothing left of a depot. Amtrak plans to bring in a portable building on the old site of the L&N station on Government Street, but as of the editing of this newsletter that hasn’t happened yet. Amtrak still says that the two daily round trips will start up this year.

There is some criticism going around that “nobody” will ride these gulf coast trains. That is really an unfair criticism as it’s been 18 years without Amtrak, and it will take time to build ridership. It’s possible that ridership on the weekends may be higher than weekdays, with special events a good source of passengers. The train operations are funded for three years with the operating subsidy already in hand. No one expects the trains to make a profit and that isn’t the goal, but it’s hoped that these trains will at least have decent passenger counts. The scheduled running time Mobile to New Orleans after the upgrades have been completed is supposed to be 3 hours 25 minutes, which is about what the L&N was operating passenger trains in the 1960s. The old L&N route goes back to the 1870s and the communities have grown up around the railroad with little/no regard for providing fast passenger service. The route speed is limited mostly due to the numerous speed restrictions due to the extreme number of at-grade crossings as it seems like there is a crossing nearly every city block from Waveland all the way to Ocean Springs. There is funding available in the IIJA bipartisan infrastructure bill to overpass/tunnel under the tracks to remove crossings, but it won’t be a cheap or easy fix.

Baton Rouge/Shreveport to Meridian Train

There is nothing new to report on Baton Rouge or Shreveport-Meridian. The cities of Baton Rouge and Gonzales have started design work on their depots and hopefully construction will start soon. The Baton Rouge depot will be near where the old KCS depot used to stand on Government Street downtown – the railroad abandoned that site in the 1960s and built a new depot/office building near their yard in north Baton Rouge. The Canadian Pacific buyout of the Kansas City Southern is expected to close soon – perhaps in March or April. The railroad's cooperative position toward operating Amtrak trains has not changed, but it's really hard to say when we will see the startup of service here. It could take a year or two to build train stations, and to upgrade/build a new bridge across the Bonnet Carre Spillway. Like the gulf coast this route has a lot of at-grade crossings, especially in the River Parishes. Both the bridge and the crossings will likely have to be resolved before we see Amtrak service. It would be nice if the Baton Rouge and Mobile trains could eventually be combined into one operation.

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. Also, 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.
- Amtrak trains in/out of New Orleans were sold out before/after Mardi Gras. Most of those full trains were operated reasonably close to on time.



L&N's "Hummingbird" train eastbound from New Orleans at Flomaton, AL in October of 1950. Photo by Ron Flanary.

2023 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 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, March 18, 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.



LARP Membership Application

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

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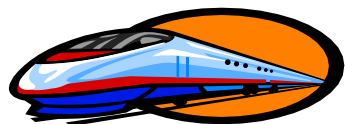
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