

# *Louisiana Association of Railroad Passengers*

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

## March-April 2023 Newsletter

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### **Amtrak**

#### **National Happenings**

Amtrak FY24 budget is in limbo. The House has not been engaging in any sort of regular order with budget committees, and there has been no discussion of budgets. The only thing the House has been focused on is the ‘debt ceiling’ and extracting unspecified budget cuts to increase borrowing authority. But there really hasn’t been any budget action in the Senate, either, even though things are proceeding more orderly on the Senate side. Even if the House insists on deep cuts to programs like Amtrak, there is no appetite with the White House and Senate to go along. Like in past years, the most likely outcome will be a continuing budget resolution at/near last year’s level.

Senator John Tester (D-MT) has blocked President Biden’s five nominees to the Amtrak Board, saying they are too concentrated from the northeast instead of being geographically spread. Tester isn’t alone as several Republican Senators were making the same complaint, but Tester formally moved to block their nominations. Except for Mayor Koos of Normal, IL, the administration picks were questionable from a competency standpoint. The Northeasterners nominated by President Biden had no experience in rail travel at all. The Amtrak Board is a big deal as they hire the Chief Executive and set policy for the company (like recently focusing on cost cutting instead of repairing stored equipment), so the hope is now that the new slate of nominees will be more focused on long-distance trains and the national system.

#### **Dining Car Service**

The *CITY of New Orleans* has its dining car back in the consist after an absence of several months. However, flexible dining only is being offered to sleeping car passengers without food being prepared on board. It is believed that at least the kitchen in the dining car is being used to heat up the food by a lone attendant, and passengers can eat their meals in the dining car if they want to (without tablecloths or any other finery). At least the cars are back in the consist with the possibility of properly reinstated dining car service later. With the *Crescent*, dining cars are still not back in the consists, but New Orleans has at least two Viewliner dining cars and Amtrak is supposedly training new crews. There is no timeline for the restoration of dining car service on this train. Only one dining car has been restored in the East – the *Silver Star*. The *Silver Meteor* is supposed to be next, perhaps by July or so. With the *Crescent*, assuming that the training goes well maybe the dining car will be restored by the end of the year. But it does seem that Amtrak has made a commitment to bring dining car service back to the East.

#### **Equipment**

The *Sunset Limited* lately has been operating recently as only a five-car train – one sleeper/crew, sleeper, diner, lounge, and just one coach. It is believed that the second coach will be restored in June. The *Crescent* has been

operating as a seven-car train with three Amfleet II coaches, lounge, two Viewliner sleepers, and crew baggage. It's been reported that Amtrak is selling roomettes in the crew car as well. The *Crescent* could really use a 4th coach like it used to regularly have before covid, and a 3<sup>rd</sup> sleeper would be beneficial as well. The *CITY of New Orleans* is the healthiest of all the trains – it is a seven-car train with crew sleeper, sleeper, diner, lounge, and three coaches. With all of the consist reductions nationwide this train has remained the same as it was before, mostly because the host railroad CN requires Amtrak to operate at least seven-car trains.

## On Time Performance

For February, on-time performance was 79.2% with long-distance at 51.5%. CP and CSX earned a grade of 'A', BNSF-CN-NS a 'B', and UP a 'D.' For March, on time performance was 74.4% with long distance at 44.8%. For March, CP earned a grade of 'A', CSX-CN a 'B', BNSF-NS a 'C', and UP an 'F.'

Route Name	Feb23 OT%	Feb23 Delay/Rider	Mar23 OT%	Mar23 Delay/Rider
<i>CITY of New Orleans</i>	68.9%	102 minutes	51.6%	94 minutes
<i>Crescent</i>	59.1%	67 minutes	47.5%	78 minutes
<i>Sunset Limited</i>	39.4%	84 minutes	26.4%	111 minutes
<i>Texas Eagle</i>	57.3%	108 minutes	45.5%	114 minutes

Amtrak measures on-time performance with a 15-minute scale over an entire route with all stations considered. The on-time performance for all the trains above showed a sharp decline in March. On the *Crescent* line, freight interference has increased around Meridian, Laurel, Picayune, and the Press Street yard in New Orleans. On the *Sunset Limited* line, congestion has increased around the Avondale yard resulting in delays to both west and eastbound trains. The eastbound trains have been impacted more than westbound with trains waiting for 1-2 hours to get past the yard and onto the Huey Long Bridge.

## Gulf Coast Restoration

Amtrak continues to operate test trains from New Orleans to Mobile training crews. Except for Mobile, the station stops are minimally ready to go with temporary platforms in place. For Mobile, the city plans to build an open-air shelter for the depot and the city will install a station track. There is no estimate on how quickly a depot/new track can be constructed in Mobile, but it could take several months at least and there has not been the start of any new construction as of the editing of this newsletter. Amtrak has said that it plans to start service in 2023 but it's becoming difficult to see how that timeline will be met.

## Baton Rouge/Meridian to Dallas Train

Much of the focus recently has been on the gulf coast with little/no new progress made to Baton Rouge. After a glitzy and high-profile inspection made with the Southern Belle business train, the route has seemingly been pushed to the back burner. The state has at least asked for federal funding to replace the KCS (now CPKC) Bonnet Carre Spillway railway bridge and has hired consultants to do environmental impact assessments. Baton Rouge and Gonzales have hired architects for new stations and have money in place to build, but no construction has started as of yet. Service will begin to Mobile as soon as possible, but evidently not Baton Rouge.

At least ten years ago when the Meridian to Dallas train was proposed Amtrak was planning to split the *Crescent* at Meridian with one section going to Dallas and the other New Orleans. Evidently Amtrak was close to implementing this service with agreements in place, but they decided at the last minute not to do it. Then when the proposal came up again there was talk of operating a separate Dallas to Atlanta train – actually two of them in each direction. But the reality hit of there not being enough long-distance equipment to operate two new trains, so now the splitting of the train in Meridian is back on the table again. Truthfully Amtrak doesn't have enough available equipment to be able to properly equip this split train, either. Right now, Amtrak can't even properly equip the

trains it is now running - how can Amtrak be expected to operate new services when it can barely operate what it has now? Also since this route was first proposed Amtrak has downgraded the *Crescent* by the removal of its dining car and (at least) one coach, and what is now operated from New York to New Orleans is not enough to make two viable trains. Does Amtrak intend to operate just one coach/sleeper to either Dallas or New Orleans? The restoration of this route has a couple of advantages working in its favor – a cooperative railroad (the new CPKC) and federal funding available to upgrade the tracks/build stations. But until Amtrak shows more interest in repairing parked passenger cars, any talk of restoration on this line will be moot.

## 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.
- Brightline in Florida unveiled its new Orlando station to the public with good reviews from those that attended the grand opening. Tickets on the Orlando line are supposed to go on sale in May with service starting perhaps in June. And Brightline has started turning an operating profit on the West Palm to Miami portion of the route, a profit the company says it didn’t ever expect to make.



Illinois Central’s train 5, the southbound Panama Limited, departing Chicago for New Orleans in July, 1967. Photo by David DeVault in the collection of Ron Flanary.

## 2023 LARP Officers

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

***Dues were payable January 1, 2023.***

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, May 13, 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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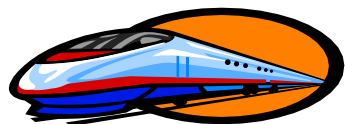
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