

Louisiana Association of Railroad Passengers

P.O. Box 57551 New Orleans, LA 70157

www.LARPrail.com

November-December 2023 Newsletter

John Sita, Jr.—Editor

jsitajr@gmail.com

Amtrak

National Happenings

The Federal Railway Administration released over \$8 billion in funds to construct new high-speed rail and conventional rail, and also millions in study money to bring more passenger rail corridors to fruition. New Orleans to Baton Rouge and Meridian to Shreveport are both recipients of \$500,000 each to study the implementation of both corridors. Once the studies are complete and the costs are known then application can be made to the FRA to fund construction.

The clown show that is the US House of Representatives continues. There was an active proposal among House Republicans to cut Amtrak by about two-thirds, but they didn't have enough votes to enact these cuts into their budget. The entire Transportation Housing and Urban Development (THUD) bill that funds Amtrak went down with a thud! This has been the most dysfunctional and least productive House pretty much in US history. Domestic programs including Amtrak are funded at previous year levels via Continuing Resolution through mid-January when again there will be a threat of a government shutdown.

Dining Car Service

Amtrak seems committed to bringing back dining car service to all of its overnight trains, but when they plan on doing it is unknown. Amtrak is still hiring for many positions so perhaps in 2024 we'll see more dining car service restored. The *CITY of New Orleans* and *Texas Eagle* both need enhancements (both operated for periods over the summer without dining cars), and the *Crescent* still doesn't have a dining car in the consist. The *Crescent* has been completely lacking a dining car since July of 2019.

Equipment

Amtrak desperately needs to bring more cars into service, and even though refurbished cars are starting to trickle out of the Beech Grove shops, trains are still operating with a critical shortage of revenue-earning cars. Amtrak is still really short of equipment with Superliners still being used in short-distance midwest corridor service. The *Sunset Limited* has operated for much of 2023 with just one coach (San Antonio to New Orleans), and the *Crescent* operated all summer with just three coaches instead of the four it had before the pandemic. Amtrak finally did release a request for proposal for new long-distance cars (due back from vendors in mid-2024) but it could take five to ten years beyond the order date before these cars could come into service. It would probably be 2030 at the earliest before these new cars could be delivered, and in the meantime most of the Superliners and all of the Amfleet II cars will be over 50 years old by that time. Amtrak hasn't said whether they would go with all single

level cars or a mix of single and bi-level cars like they have now, but one interesting feature is that the consists may be more fixed in nature than they are now.

On Time Performance

For October overall, on time performance was 77.7% with long distance at 57.7%. For the month, CPKC earned a grade of 'A' while CSX-CN-NS-UP all a 'B.' For November overall, on-time performance was 78.4% with long-distance at 61.7%. CPKC and CSX earned a grade of 'A', and BNSF-CN-NS-UP all earned a 'B.'

Route Name	Oct23 OT%	Oct23 Delay/Rider	Nov23 OT%	Nov23 Delay/Rider
<i>CITY of New Orleans</i>	57.7%	68 minutes	53.9%	90 minutes
<i>Crescent</i>	59.3%	81 minutes	64.5%	61 minutes
<i>Sunset Limited</i>	53.7%	64 minutes	59.3%	77 minutes
<i>Texas Eagle</i>	60.1%	56 minutes	68.9%	57 minutes

Both the *Sunset Limited* and *Texas Eagle* have improved in on time performance dramatically, going from the low single digits to the middle of the pack. Amtrak filing complaints before the Surface Transportation Board likely had something to do with the improvement. Amtrak measures on-time performance with a 15-minute scale over an entire route with all stations considered.

Gulf Coast Restoration

Amtrak has stated that they would like to start up gulf coast service in mid-2024, but Mobile is still negotiating with Amtrak over how much rent they will pay on their yet to be built depot. There also still is no pocket track to store the trains overnight, so the chance of a mid-2024 are quickly evaporating with late 2024 or even early 2025 more likely.

Baton Rouge/Meridian to Dallas Train

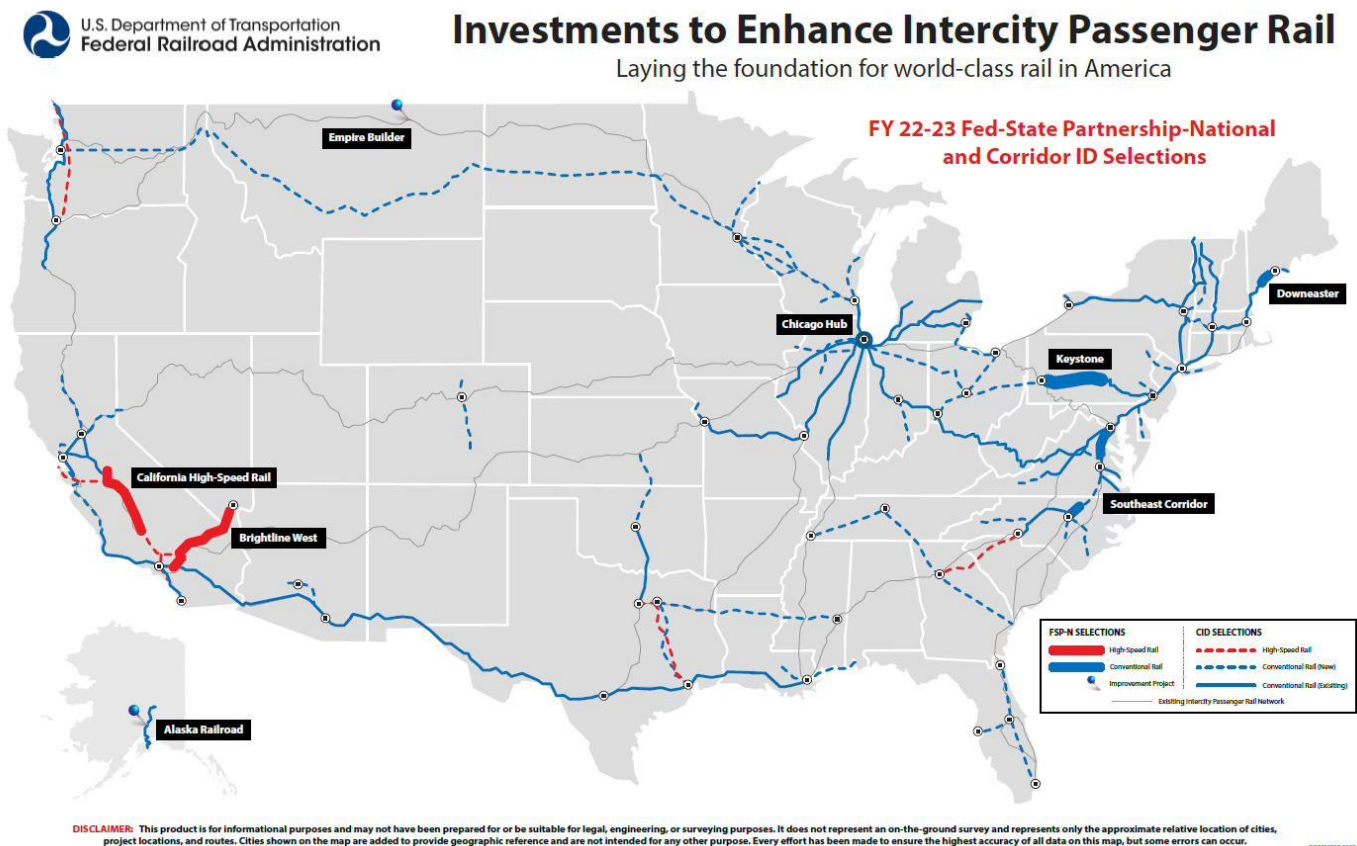
Baton Rouge got a lot of attention in October with a test run made by Amtrak with CEO Stephen Gardner and Louisiana governor John Bel Edwards on board, and the result was an official agreement for Amtrak to operate the trains on this line. However, new governor Jeff Landry will be taking over in early January and it's unknown how he will prioritize Amtrak service – if he even does at all. Louisiana did find \$20 million that can be put towards construction of the route, and operating costs are supposed to be mostly paid for through incremental tax districts around the new depots.

Both New Orleans to Baton Rouge and Meridian to Dallas corridors each received \$500,000 each to further study the implementation of service. These studies are required if the routes are to get funding for actually constructing enhancements necessary to bring the trains to fruition. The old Baton Rouge study is at least 10 years old, and Meridian to Shreveport has never had a proper study. Once the studies are completed then application can be made to fund the construction, so this process shouldn't take more than a year or so.

It may be too late, but we at LARP think the location of the Baton Rouge depot on Government Street is a mistake. This location likely would not be a good generator of passengers. Also, North Baton Rouge has said they would like the train to terminate there instead of a downtown location. What would be optimal would be to use both the CPKC line and CN lines together. The route could use the CPKC line to just south of Baton Rouge with a new connection built to the CN line that could take the route right past the LSU campus with a station nearby, and then terminate somewhere in north Baton Rouge. Think of special trains operated from New Orleans to LSU football games, potentially carrying thousands of football fans that would instead be on I-10.

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 began operations into Orlando in late September and currently is operating 16 trains in each direction between Orlando and Miami. The trains appear to be growing in popularity and ridership with some sell outs during Thanksgiving week and around Christmas.
- The annual Crescent Monday-Thursday closure is happening again in early 2024 – this time it’s going longer and will go from January 2 clear through the end of February.



The official map from the FRA on what they are either funding for construction or for further study. Just because a route or segment isn't on the map now doesn't mean it never will be considered, but routes that are on the map now for further study will be funded once the studies are completed. New Orleans to Mobile is already funded for construction. There are active proposals to extend service from Baton Rouge to Shreveport and east from Mobile to Jacksonville, although they didn't get study money this round³.

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, January 13, 2024, 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 _____

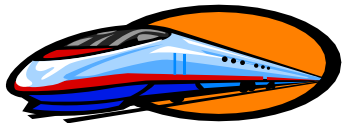
Address _____

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**