

Louisiana Association of Railroad Passengers

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www.LARPrail.com

January-February 2024 Newsletter

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Amtrak

National Happenings

The government has nearly run out of money again and has turned to another short-term Continuing Resolution – the House passed a two-week extension right at the end of the month of February. The Senate was supposed to take up their CR budget bill by March 1, so it doesn't look as if there will be an immediate government shutdown. Amtrak is funded along with other agencies on a pro-rata basis, so as long as Congress keeps kicking the can down the road they should do ok. The House is so dysfunctional right now that they can't even pass basic budget bills with their own Republican majority – the Republican Speaker had to reach out to the opposition Democratic party to pass this latest two-week extension. This is no way to run a railroad, literally.

Dining Car Service

No news on dining car service restoration, but Amtrak doesn't seem to be in any kind of hurry to add back this amenity that was cut from the eastern trains five years ago. The *Silver Meteor* and *Silver Star* have diners available for 1st class only, but the *Crescent* still doesn't have one in its consist. We keep hearing rumors that it will be next but there is no time frame given.

Equipment

The *Sunset Limited* continues to operate with just one Superliner coach between New Orleans and San Antonio – certainly demand is far greater than just 80 passengers that one coach can carry. It ran with two coaches for years until recently and had three at one time. The *Crescent* also still operates with just three coaches when it used to have four and sometimes five coaches. The Amfleet coach cars had been dispersed to corridor operations around Chicago and some in the pacific northwest. Amtrak says those cars are supposed to return but the trains are still operating short of cars the same as before. A new car order won't help the present situation as a new car order delivery would likely to be 5-7 years away, possibly as much as 10 years. If they order long-distance cars from Siemens there is supposedly a two or three year backlog before they can even start construction. Siemens is supposed to be building another new car plant on the east coast but that is also years way from reality.

The Amtrak Inspector General highlighted a problem that is likely the main cause for Amtrak being so slow to return equipment to service – parts shortages. The problem is that Amtrak really doesn't have a formalized procurement process in place and that has led to shortages of needed parts. Crews are having to take parts off of stored cars just to keep the current fleet running, and some terminals are hoarding parts. This is so completely ridiculous that Amtrak didn't have any way of tracking which parts they needed and a process for ordering them.

On Time Performance

For December overall, on time performance was 80.6% with long distance at 67.3%. For the month, CPKC-CSX-CN-BNSF earned a grade of 'A' while NS-UP earned a 'B.' For January overall, on-time performance was 74.3% with long-distance at 54.5%. CPKC-CN-NS earned a grade of 'A', and BNSF-NS-UP all earned a 'B.'

Route Name	Dec23 OT%	Dec23 Delay/Rider	Jan24 OT%	Jan24 Delay/Rider
<i>CITY of New Orleans</i>	70.3%	82 minutes	58.8%	92 minutes
<i>Crescent</i>	65.0%	47 minutes	66.5%	50 minutes
<i>Sunset Limited</i>	55.4%	70 minutes	59.8%	75 minutes
<i>Texas Eagle</i>	73.9%	61 minutes	61.6%	94 minutes

Both the *Sunset Limited* and *Texas Eagle* have improved in on time performance dramatically, going from the low single digits and hundreds of minutes of delay to basically the middle of the pack. Amtrak measures on-time performance with a 15-minute scale over an entire route with all stations considered.

Gulf Coast Restoration

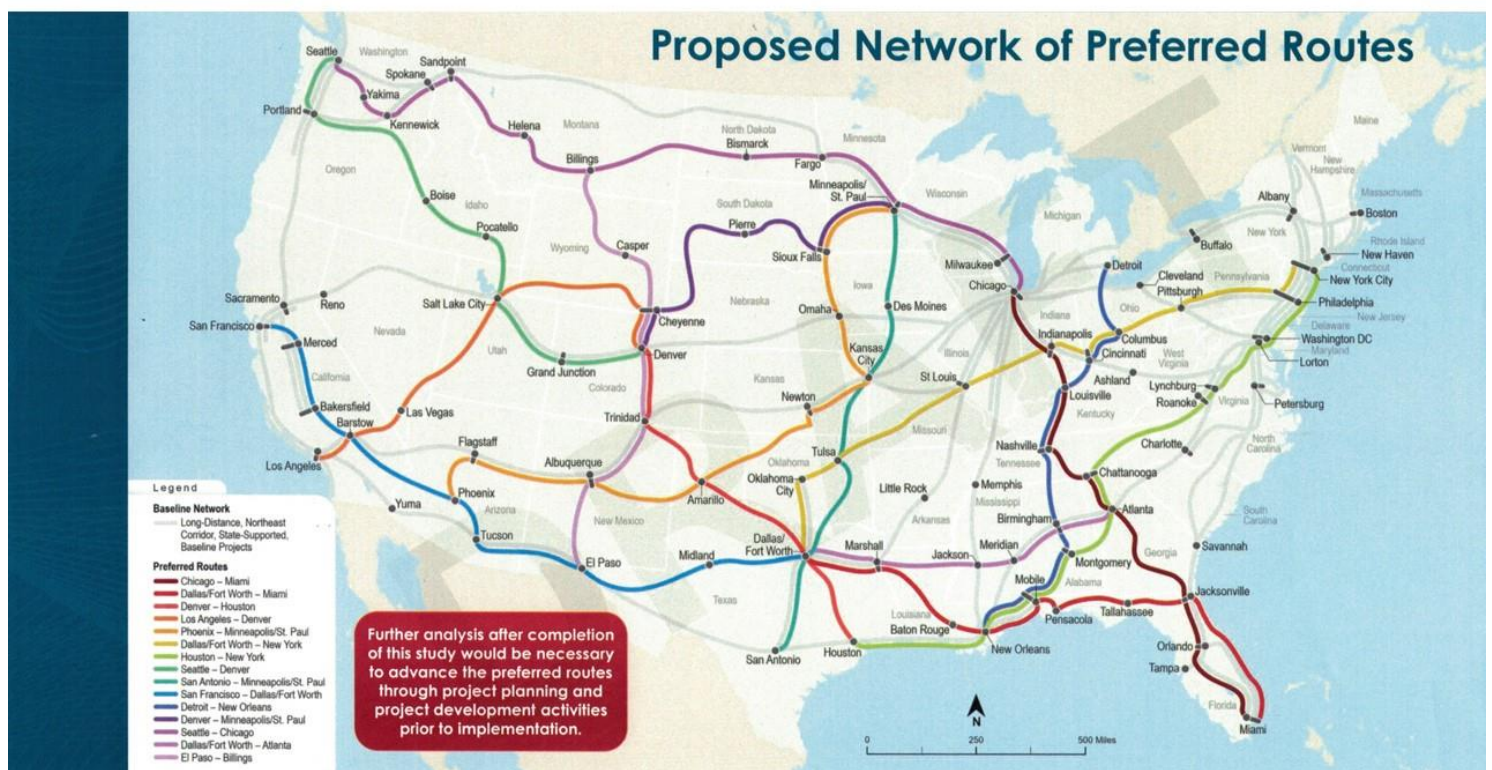
There has still been no movement on the Gulf Coast train – and the Surface Transportation Board is starting to ask questions as to why the trains are not yet running. It's been over one year since Amtrak and the railroads/port of Mobile came to an understanding to cooperate, and still there hasn't been a formal agreement ratified. The Board has been especially critical of Amtrak because of the lack of agreement with the various parties. Amtrak had seemed to be in rush to start service right away and they initially asked the STB to order the railroads to immediately start service at one point, but now that the parties are cooperating there still isn't an agreement in place. The construction of a station track and depot in Mobile has not yet begun, and funding for the improvements to route tracks and sidings has not come down from the federal government because of the lack of a formal agreement. Mobile may or may not approve of the station site for Amtrak (basically the old depot site) and without an agreement with Mobile the train can't operate. The whole project seems stuck with no clear resolution in sight.

Other new services have come about by formal agreement with the operating railroads first with upgrades made before the trains started operating. All the new recent services in Virginia and North Carolina started with these formal agreements followed up by funding to significantly upgrade track infrastructure. There is a second Harrisburg to Pittsburg train in Pennsylvania that will start next year, but first the state came to an agreement with Norfolk Southern with upgrade funds secured before the second train starts up. The Duluth to St Paul route in Minnesota has a formal agreement with BNSF and funding secured prior to running trains (it will have a max speed of 90 mph). No other new services in recent memory have started up first with upgrades to follow. On the CSX gulf coast, crossing circuits need to be moved back on dozens of highway crossings, passing sidings need to be installed new or existing ones lengthened, and depot buildings need to be upgraded or built from scratch. Bay St. Louis and Gulfport have depots but aren't accessible to Amtrak passengers, Biloxi is an empty parking lot, and Pascagoula's old depot hasn't been touched in years. Each stop has a temporary boarding platform, but shelter and other facilities available for passengers are limited. Train service, without upgrades when it does finally start will be slow, subject to freight train delay, and lacking in depot facilities that passengers would normally expect to be available. One can reasonably expect to drive from New Orleans to Mobile in half the time it would take the train.

Amtrak also estimates that the trains will have very low ridership – after five years and the upgrades are complete Amtrak expects only 72,200 passengers spread out over two frequencies. That works out to only 49 passengers each way. By comparison they project one frequency of the *Heartland Flyer* from Ft. Worth to Oklahoma City to carry 75,100 passengers (103 each way). A really bad outcome for us would be to spend nearly \$200 million on upgrades and have the trains still lose \$373 per passenger (Amtrak's number). It could be that these older Amtrak ridership estimates are way too low, and while no one expects the trains to make money the two frequencies will need to perform similar to other short haul trains to be considered a success.

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 ridership in Florida continues to increase, and they just announced a new stop in Stuart, FL. Currently Brightline is operating 16 trains in each direction between Orlando’s airport and Miami. Plans are underway to build high-speed tracks to Tampa down the middle of I-4 from Orlando but construction has yet to start. They do seem to be coming to a consensus on the route out of Orlando.
- Amtrak says the new ALC-42 locomotives are finally performing well. Dozens of modifications have been made to them – they had problems shutting down in snowy weather. The engines have started operating on the *Crescent* and have been on the *CITY of New Orleans* regularly now.



The official phase 3 map of planned long-distance routes from the FRA. This is a doubling of the routes currently operated by Amtrak and restores much of the passenger service lost over the years. There is a route from Dallas to Miami via New Orleans, a Houston to New York route via New Orleans, a New Orleans to Detroit route via Birmingham (the old Pan American route), and a Dallas to Atlanta route. These would all have to be funded by Congress, and this is an FRA initiative, not from Amtrak.

2024 LARP Officers

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

Dues were payable January 1, 2024.

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 9 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

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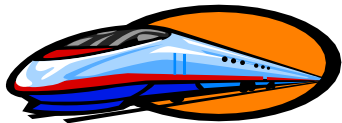
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