

Louisiana Association of Railroad Passengers

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www.LARPrail.com

July-August 2024 Newsletter

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Amtrak

National Happenings

The Department of Justice has initiated a lawsuit against Norfolk Southern for their handling of Amtrak trains with the *Crescent* mentioned in particular. This is the first time the USDOJ has initiated a proceeding against a railroad over handling of Amtrak trains (they threatened to do it in 1979 with Southern Pacific but never actually went through with it). US law says that Amtrak trains are to take preference over freight trains – and this has been a bad joke on several railroads for many years. Stockholders of NS a few years ago tried to get their Board to consider the question of Amtrak preference but met stiff resistance from the railroad – now management has to deal with the Justice Department instead. Right after the lawsuit dropped, the *Crescent*'s timekeeping improved immediately. And the Surface Transportation Board is about to hold hearings on Union Pacific's handling of the *Sunset Limited* – this is another train that has improved pretty dramatically from where it was a couple of years ago. If the railroads simply gave Amtrak preference like they are mandated to do, then they wouldn't be facing regulators and justice department lawsuits. It would make sense for railroads to allow Amtrak to operate through on time and collect their on time incentives rather than unnecessarily delay Amtrak. However, in many cases Amtrak is delayed by freight interference due to the freight railroad's inability to operate their own freight trains properly.

The House and Senate have been holding budget hearings on Amtrak and other programs, but budgets haven't been passed on time in many years, and with this being an election year budgets being passed before the deadline are actually less likely. The start of the fiscal year October 1 will very likely have a short-term Continuing Resolution, unless House Republicans want to actually shut down the government (unlikely but it's being threatened).

Equipment

Amtrak is making marginal capacity improvements this September to a few long-distance trains. They intend to operate an extra coach/sleeper on the *Texas Eagle* the days the train connects to the *Sunset Limited* at San Antonio three days per week. They also will add a coach-baggage car to the *Sunset Limited* consist, in effect restoring a partial second coach – adding about 60 more seats. However, the trains are still very short of capacity. The *Sunset Limited* still needs to have its transition sleeper restored so the entire lone sleeping car can be sold to paying passengers. The *Crescent* is still just operating with three coaches instead of four or five, and in fact one of the two sleeping cars is going to be pulled from the consist for about two months due to mandatory maintenance. Amtrak still has a long way to go in restoring capacity to its trains. They supposedly will meet their number goal of repairing cars for this fiscal year, but they still have long lines of cars sitting at their Beech Grove repair facility that are awaiting rebuilding.

On Time Performance

For June overall, on time performance was 69.8% with long distance at 41.1%. For the month, CPKC earned a grade of 'A' while CN/IC-CSX-BNSF-NS earned a 'B' and UP a 'C'. For July overall, on-time performance was 69.6% with long-distance at 40.3%. For July CPKC-CN/IC earned a grade of 'A' while CSX-BNSF-NS earned a 'B' and UP a 'C'.

Route Name	Jun24 OT%	Jun24 Delay/Rider	Jul24 OT%	Jul24 Delay/Rider
<i>CITY of New Orleans</i>	60.8%	72 minutes	69.6%	76 minutes
<i>Crescent</i>	35.8%	87 minutes	43.4%	77 minutes
<i>Sunset Limited</i>	36.4%	100 minutes	45.8%	143 minutes
<i>Texas Eagle</i>	32.3%	128 minutes	44.9%	95 minutes

These two months were pretty bad for our regional trains. The CITY was the best of the group but still well short of 80% on time required by law. Believe it or not but the *Crescent*, *Sunset Limited*, and *Texas Eagle* are all improved from what they were just a couple of years ago. Amtrak measures on-time performance with a 15-minute scale over an entire route with all stations considered. And in order to meet the on time performance standard, freight railroads are attempting to add even more scheduled running time to already slow Amtrak schedules.

Gulf Coast Restoration/Baton Rouge

Well, it looks as if the gulf coast trains finally have the green light with the funding in place. The city of Mobile voted to contribute its share toward the train's operating costs with the intention to put on two frequencies per day in the first part of 2025. We at LARP have concerns about the initial service quality. There are limited passenger facilities available as far as depots are concerned, and little/no of the track work will be completed before the trains operate. The trains will initially be quite slow, according to reports with a one-way trip of 4-1/2 hours. Our organization sponsored a press release that called upon the trains to start up only after the infrastructure work is completed. We are concerned that the initial slow (and likely unreliable) service will do more harm than good in attracting passengers, but it appears that the trains will start up without improvements anyway. Crossing circuits are timed for slower freight trains, and there is still a serious lack of capacity. There may be short stretches of 79-mph running but not much on the Mississippi gulf coast. And CSX is certainly not going to suspend their freight operations while Amtrak trains are out on their property.

There is no word on Baton Rouge at all. Our organization does have concerns about where the city of Baton Rouge is planning to build its depot on Government Street. We're not sure how much traffic is going to be generated from this location. It would be great if the depot could be on the western side of town closer to downtown and LSU.

The Future of Passenger Rail

For about the past 65 years in this country intercity passenger rail has been in a steep decline with the result being the skeletal Amtrak system that we have left today. Funding from the government has been low (nearly nonexistent) compared to the other modes, and it's only been in the past couple of years that rail funding has increased to a decent level. But what if political leaders actually listened to their constituents and started taking passenger rail seriously? What if Amtrak carried as many passengers as domestic airlines? What if an entire network of passenger-only rail lines were constructed that allowed for reliable operations without freight train interference? Imagine metro areas connected with comprehensive, quick, and frequent passenger rail service that was as fast or faster than driving. One can envision a future one day with an electric high-speed rail network similar in scope to the Interstate Highway System with connecting regional/light rail in major cities., along with the possibility of self-driving electric vehicles taking passengers the final miles to their destination.

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. Dues can also be quickly and safely paid on the website.
- The states of North Carolina and Virginia are rebuilding the old Seaboard Air Line route between Raleigh and Richmond. The cost is \$1.1 billion via President Biden’s Infrastructure Law. When complete, the restored route will save 90 minutes for travel between the south and the northeast. One day this route may be connected further south to New Orleans.
- Brightline is moving quickly on its extension from east of Los Angeles to Las Vegas. They plan to implement a 210-mile corridor with all electric trains with speeds up to 200 mph. The company plans to invest \$12 billion in addition to what the government will invest. So far the federal government has invested \$3.5 billion.
- Zane Katsikis, the first president of LARP in 1980, passed away this past July after a long illness. Zane had many passions and passenger rail was one of them. He will be missed.



The Southern Crescent slowing for the station stop at Purvis, MS in July 1978. Amtrak would take over about six months later.

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, Sept. 14, 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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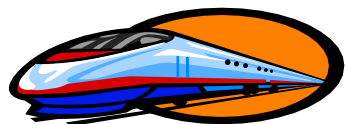
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