

Louisiana Association of Railroad Passengers

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www.LARPrail.com

May-June 2024 Newsletter

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Amtrak

National Happenings

Here we go again with proposed cuts to Amtrak for FY25. Although not nearly as severe as what was proposed last year, the Transportation Committee of the House recommended cutting nearly \$300 million from last year's 2.42 billion budget. If enacted it would not be shutdown budget, but it would hamper Amtrak's efforts to continue to bring equipment to a state of good repair. This is all likely a fruitless exercise as the dysfunction in the House has prevented them from passing budgets prior to the start of the fiscal year – they have chosen to limp along with a series of short-term Continuing Resolutions and then finally agree to pass a catch all budget about halfway into the fiscal year. So, getting overly concerned now about Amtrak cuts isn't warranted as House dysfunction benefits us.

Dining Car Service

The dining car was finally restored to the *Crescent* on June 1. The announcement was made in mid-May and the car actually came back on quickly. They are still serving flexible meals to sleeping car passengers only but at least some passengers can take advantage of the diner. Coach passengers are still denied access to the diner, even though the *Lake Shore Limited* allows coach passengers in. It is likely a matter of getting enough crews hired to restore full service, but it's a victory that the dining car is back in the consist. It had been five years since dining car service was removed and the employees furloughed.

Equipment

Amtrak continues to have problems with the new ALC-42 locomotives. They have become regular on the *Crescent* and have been on the *CITY of New Orleans* for a while now. They break down all too frequently and when it happens it causes significant delays for passengers. The trains are still operating well short of normal passenger carrying capacity as the *Sunset Limited* has just one coach still between New Orleans and San Antonio and the *Crescent* just three coaches instead of four or five it used to have. Amtrak says they want to double ridership by 2040 but they seem to be going in the wrong direction with how they are equipping the trains.

On Time Performance

For April overall, on time performance was 77.6% with long distance at 53.6%. For the month, CPKC-CN/IC earned a grade of 'A' while CSX-BNSF-NS-UP earned a 'B.' For May overall, on-time performance was 75.3% with long-distance at 49.8%. For May again CPKC alone earned a grade of 'A' while CN/IC-CSX-BNSF-NS-UP all earned a 'B.'

Route Name	Apr24 OT%	Apr24 Delay/Rider	May24 OT%	May24 Delay/Rider
<i>CITY of New Orleans</i>	73.0%	149 minutes	57.3%	80 minutes
<i>Crescent</i>	52.4%	65 minutes	46.3%	81 minutes
<i>Sunset Limited</i>	46.2%	131 minutes	42.3%	227 minutes
<i>Texas Eagle</i>	54.1%	112 minutes	35.8%	115 minutes

None of the trains met the 80% standard for April, and May was significantly worse. All of the trains were delayed by the usual things like freight interference and signal issues, but Amtrak equipment and crew issues also caused big delays. Amtrak measures on-time performance with a 15-minute scale over an entire route with all stations considered.

Gulf Coast Restoration

Reports have surfaced late June that there are not enough votes on the Mobile City Council to approve the \$1 million per year funding to operate the gulf coast trains. The port of Mobile is onboard and has even offered to help subsidize the trains, but it has to get past the city council first. If the funding isn't approved progress on the trains will likely be severely delayed. The state of Alabama seems open now to helping to pay for the trains, but funding would not be available until their fiscal year starts in October at the earliest. If the startup of the trains is delayed it would be nice if that \$178 million CRISI grant could be pulled down and work started on the track/station upgrades. LARP is concerned about the initial proposed schedules of the trains with a slow 4-1/2 hour schedule for 140 rail miles (just a 31-mph average speed). It actually would be far better to get the track work done before the trains run as that has been the model for every other new startup in the last ten years or so.

Baton Rouge

No word on Baton Rouge at all – but with the current political environment now in Baton Rouge no news is probably good news.

The Future of Passenger Rail

As late as 1960 the railroads were still carrying a significant number of passengers, capturing about 25% of the total air, rail, and bus public transport market. After that the railroads started cutting passenger miles and passenger infrastructure and later that decade entire routes, so the relevance of passenger rail outside of the Northeast Corridor declined dramatically after that. Then when Amtrak took over in 1971 about two-thirds of the remaining trains were discontinued leaving just the skeletal route structure we have now. It's actually gotten a good bit smaller since then with Amtrak cuts in the 1970s and then again in the 1990s. And Amtrak's (self-imposed) equipment constraints have further reduced relevance.

The current freight railroads simply do not have the interest, straight modern alignments, or the capacity to properly host Amtrak trains, and they are not going to make improvements that they consider mostly beneficial to Amtrak. The result is that Amtrak trains continue to get slower and slower. A full 90 minutes has been added to the *Crescent* timetable between Meridian and Birmingham due to the lack of track capacity. A Greyhound bus is now 2-1/2 hours faster than Amtrak between New Orleans – Atlanta. The current *CITY of New Orleans* schedule is nearly as slow as what Illinois Central was operating in 1940 with heavyweight cars pulled by steam locomotives. Amtrak really isn't capable of upgrading freight routes to achieve higher speeds, even with the big pot of money they have received from the bipartisan infrastructure law. States can be encouraged to do so, but what state wants to invest millions into a freight route that hosts one daily Amtrak train (or even less frequent)? There have been some states that have upgraded select straight freight routes to 110-mph for multi-daily Amtrak corridor trains but still they are having to deal with intersecting grade crossings and freight train interference.

What the US needs is a large-scale program to build higher speed (125 mph) passenger routes nationwide without grade crossings, similar in scope to the Interstate Highway System. Like highways, the government could build out the track structure and stations and then let private companies (or Amtrak) compete to run the trains, paying a fee to maintain the tracks/stations. Imagine getting on a train in New Orleans and arriving in Houston or Memphis just four hours later, Atlanta or Dallas six hours later, or Orlando in seven hours. That is what's possible if a new route structure is built, and no matter how much money is spent upgrading the freight railroads these kinds of fast running times will never be achievable – or anything close to it – because of their obsolete sawtooth alignments.

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.
- Brightline West has officially broken ground on their Las Vegas route. The total cost will be \$12 billion with \$3 billion from the bipartisan infrastructure law and \$9 billion from private investors. The transit time from Rancho Cucamonga to Las Vegas will be about 2 hours with top speeds of at least 180 mph.



Southern Railway's train 41 *The Pelican* backing into New Orleans Union Passenger Terminal for the very first time on April 16, 1954. Photo from the Tulane University Special Collections.

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, July 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

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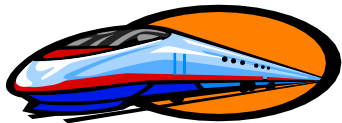
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