

Meeting of the Southern Rail Commission

March 1, 2019 9:00am-12:00pm
Bay St Louis Old Town Community Center
122 Court Street
Bay St Louis, MS 39520

Call to Order: *Chairman John Spain*

Roll Call

Attendees: John Spain, Knox Ross, John Clyde Riggs, David Clark, Toby Bennington, Stephen McNair, Kay Kell, Roy Woodruff, Jerry Wall

On Phone: Anita Archie, Alex Beckmann

Guests: John Robert Smith, Haley Blakeman, Dan Dealy, Phil Jones, Debbie Vignes, Maggie Woodruff, Todd Stennis, Betsy Nelson, Larry Watts, Dean Goodell, Mayor Mike Pharr, Janice Hamilton, Mrs. Green, Mr. Sinclair, Denise Jacobs, Mrs. McDonald, Henry Winters

Pledge of Allegiance and Prayer

Recognition of Special Guests and new Commissioners

REGULAR BUSINESS:

- I. Commissioner Woodruff made a motion to approve the minutes from the last meeting and Commissioner McNair seconded. The Commission unanimously approved the minutes from the meeting of December 7, 2018.
- II. Legislative Affairs Update - *John Robert Smith*
 - a. The Executive Committee visited Capitol Hill in D.C. January 7-10. The visits were very productive, and the committee touched base with other passenger rail supporters outside of the south. Other states are starting to create commissions like the SRC, and SRC has been encouraging this, as the hope is to have future funding opportunities for which only commissions could apply. The budget included many transportation funds.
 - i. Louisiana - Visited the entire LA congressional delegation and staff, and there was interest in connecting large cities in Louisiana at better times and more efficiently. All are supportive of the project, and the North LA route would pay for itself, so there is a lot of interest in that project too.
 - ii. Mississippi – Met with Senator Hyde Smith and Representative Michael Guest. Senator Wiggins continues to push forward legislation. They agreed to be strong supporters even though their district is not directly affected; they see a value to the state.
 - iii. Alabama – Met with Senator Shelby’s staff, Senator Jones, Representative Byrne, Representative Roby. They committed support after understanding it would not impact the Port of Mobile.
 - iv. Other important visits include those with Amtrak VP Gardner, Senator Cantwell, Representative Price, Representative Diaz-Balart, Representative Graves, Senate

Commerce Committee, House Transportation and Infrastructure, Railroads Subcommittee, and Senate Appropriations.

1. Amtrak confirmed they can have trains running in 24 months based on discussions with CSX.
2. T4A is working on language to reauthorize CRISI funding
- v. John Robert and John Spain thanked Alex Beckmann for his service to the Southern Rail Commission. He will be working for Congressman Lupenski on rail and transportation issues.
- b. Largest federal appropriations in history for Amtrak including for their Northeast Corridor, national network, Fed-State Partnership for State of Good Repair, Consolidated Rail Infrastructure & Safety Improvements, etc.
- c. Other important appropriations
 1. There are plenty of funds set aside to build out rail, but actions should be strategic
 2. Additional \$500,000 for Gulf Coast Working Group
 3. Congressional support for long-distance networks
 4. Etc.
- ii. John Robert cautioned that the budget deal will expire, and the sequester will return, which would mean a \$126B cut. President proposed an additional 5% cut. The Highway Trust Fund will bankrupt again. These challenges will make it much harder for transportation infrastructure across the board and harder for rail.
- d. Mississippi State Legislature
 - i. Todd and Knox have visited with legislators once a week for the past month. CPEX and T4A put together a briefing book and a pamphlet with the Inspection Train video on a jump drive for the visits.
 - ii. The \$8M project at Port of Pascagoula has helped to build support. It has been a good community development project in partnership with Port of Pascagoula.
 - iii. Having Amtrak there to communicate the timeline and its commitment has helped build support. They are also helping to find ways to fund the project and given good feedback and support. Coastal legislators and elected officials in Jackson need to know that you and local residents support it. Setting up more meetings with Amtrak. Appropriations and authorizations bills have both been introduced.
- e. False Narratives
 - i. Bill Cork and Grover Norquist falsely claimed there would be property takings, there was no comprehensive study done, that service will be like the old service, and that Mississippi won't benefit at all. T4A is actively counteracting these false claims.
- f. Station Area Grants
 - i. Cities like Bay St. Louis and Pascagoula need to provide the station information and paperwork soon or the grants will be pulled and they will not get a stop. Providing the information and paperwork shows commitment from local cities, which is important because it was a 50/50 federal/local match.
 - ii. Station area plans are complete in Gonzales, St John, Baton Rouge Downtown, Baton Rouge Health District, and Mobile.
 - iii. Construction plans are being done for: Bay St Louis, Gulfport, Biloxi, Pascagoula

1. Birmingham
 2. Tuscaloosa
 3. Anniston (Still working on it, but the cost is rising to extend station platform)
- iv. If a commitment is made by MS and AL **before end of March**, we can still get all of the FY18 money.
- g. CRISI and R&E grants
 - i. R&E – MS and LA have provided the full match. T4A anticipates that SRC will apply for the FY18 and FY19 grants with MS and LA.
 - h. Questions
 - i. Jack Norris: When will the next Transportation Reauthorization will happen? *In 2020.*
 - ii. Stephen McNair: Where are we on Gov. Ivey's commitment? *We don't know. John explained that the governor's concern was the impact to the Port of Mobile. We will not impact the port at this point. We can put together materials, write a letter on SRC letterhead, and host a reception for legislators to make sure that they understand that there is no impact to the port.*
 - iii. Toby Bennington: There is a lack of education in south Alabama. We need an executive summary document to convey financial information and economic benefit for the passenger train. He asked the commission to consider working with Jackson State to create an economic impact education tool.
 - iv. Knox Ross: Studying congestion issues and making recommendations for passenger and freight to go around the port would build a lot of support.
 - v. Alex Beckmann: Mobile has put in \$300,000 for station grants. They are fully-committed and positive about getting the service up and running. It would be a 15:1 return on money for Alabama. Still need \$2.78M from Alabama which includes \$500,000 for Port of Mobile. \$300M for R&E operations grant, and the return on that investment is 40:1. Both can be paid over time.
 - vi. Anita Archie: We need Alabama's commitment numbers to be clearly outlined in a document, along with total cost shares by state on a spreadsheet.
 1. We have to be brilliant with communications with Mr. Lyons at the port.
 2. Reach out to legislators throughout the rest of the state and build support in Alabama like Mississippi did.
 3. New chief of staff in the Governor's office that is not as familiar with this.
 4. If there is an eminent deadline, it needs to go directly to the governor now. Session starts March 5th, and budget will be developed quickly. We need to get that information to Anita now.
 5. Haley will send information to Anita asap and she will forward to governor's office.
 6. There are ports in all cities along the rail line. We have to be sensitive to freight in all ports, including Mobile.
- III. Financial and Administrative Report - *Debbie Vignes*
 - a. Financial statement as of Jan 31, 2019: \$660,000 in cash. All states have made their dues payments for the year. There is a surplus of \$15,511 with \$17,000 expenditures in February. There is a balance of about \$110,000 unrestricted funds. John has received the

disbursement checks for three cities' rail station planning grants. The audit was completed in January. Commissioner Bennington motioned to approve the audit, and Commissioner Clark seconded. There was a motion to adopt the financial report by Commissioner Woodruff and seconded by Commissioner Bennington.

- IV. Communications and Media Update - *Haley Blakeman and Dan Dealy*
 - a. Haley talked about working with the T4A on briefing books for MS, AL, LA, and Jackson legislative visits, summary pamphlets and invitations for Jackson legislative reception, and website updates. These resources are available for commissioners to help build support in their areas.
 - b. Dan talked about the SRC's Facebook and Twitter accounts; they are helping to build support around the nation for rail. Resources are available to the commissioners to help promote SRC and Gulf Coast Rail.

OLD BUSINESS:

- I. Report on Executive Committee activities - *Spain, Ross, Blankenship*
 - a. Concentrating on the great success in Mississippi and building a successful model for other commissions and building support across the country.
 - b. Wiley got an introduction to how hard you have to work on the Hill.
- II. Update on Gulf Coast Working Group next steps - *Spain, Ross and John Robert Smith*
 - a. SRC got \$500,000 from another federal grant that had not been spent. Asked Congress to reallocate it to SRC for work that had already been done.
- III. Update on station planning grants - *John Robert Smith*
 - a. Found an old earmark and refocused how it was used on matching grants for local station design and planning. Station plans are now complete and will be on the SRC website.
- IV. State Reports:
 - a. Louisiana:
 - i. Update on New Orleans to Baton Rouge passenger rail project
 - ii. Phil at DOTD – 1) under Dean's oversight completed station study and some need a lot of repair. Local communities are interested. Outlining a checklist for each station to meet national standards. Want to be able to give additional funding to help with improvements. 2) Continuing to look at funds. Proposal for a study to update BR-NO rail study and examine the department's role in the project. Hoping to open up additional funding by pulling some from lots of little pots of money.
 - iii. Previous administration refused to let DOTD participate in passenger rail. This study update will look at how DOTD can be integrated into running or participating in rail.
 - iv. Station plans are done. \$40 M of potential station improvements.
 - v. In the middle of a poll to gauge support from BR-NO and will create a briefing book after.
 - vi. Grant for ADA upgrades in New Orleans – Amtrak will match with \$943,000. State of good repair grant. DOTD Secretary signed support letter and SRC signed on to grant as a partner.
 - b. Mississippi:
 - i. Knox brought up that there has been continued disruption to passenger rail. With some planning, these disruptions can be resolved with alternate routes (i.e. –

Bonnet Carre open, so have to take a bus). Amtrak needs to pay more attention to it and minimize disruption.

- ii. John Robert is concerned that Amtrak is pulling back from long distance service, but Congress has said no.
 - iii. Knox asked for John Robert to work with him to help address this.
- c. Alabama:
- i. Update on new commissioners – They meet in Montgomery following this meeting to discuss what is needed to build Ivey’s support. Approval is needed for a study by Jackson State University. It is an economic study with an educational component. Toby has sent an email to all commissioners with questions/points of clarification needed from JSU. Toby asked the commission to approve the revised scope for approximately \$18,000. There were no objections from the Alabama commissioners or other commissioners. The Executive Committee will approve the cost and contract.
 - ii. Anita needs a one pager with the following: (Alex and Haley will send the information to all Alabama Commissioners)
 - 1. Firm commitment in writing from other governors would be helpful to Anita. (John Robert will send CRISI grant support letters.)
 - 2. Firm number of passengers would be useful (Lott report)
 - 3. Narrative about what happens if any state pulls out
 - 4. Local commitments from Mobile, in writing
 - 5. Operating expenses
 - 6. Potential sources of funding
 - 7. List of any rail lines being moved

NEW BUSINESS:

- I. Report from Amtrak – Todd Stennis
 - a. \$6M toward CRISI grant
 - b. \$900,000 toward BR-NO rail grant with City of New Orleans and Amtrak
 - c. Working to finish up the Birmingham Intermodal Center
 - d. He has been going to Jackson every week. He offered to do this in Montgomery as well, but Alabama commissioners have to tell him when it is needed. Brings Jo McCue from Amtrak when needed.
- II. Executive session

SUMMARY AND SCHEDULE OF UPCOMING MEETINGS:

- I. June 7, 2019 Louisiana
- II. September 6, 2019 Alabama
- III. December 6, 2019 Mississippi

ADJOURNMENT