

For: U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

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Public Hearing: The Role of Intercity Passenger Rail During National Emergencies

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Chairman Brown and Honorable members and staff of the Congressional Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure Subcommittee on Railroads, Pipelines, and Hazardous Materials,

On August 29, 2005, the Gulf Coast experienced the worst natural disaster in US history. Hurricane Katrina devastated the Louisiana and Mississippi coasts causing unimaginable death and destruction. Many factors have been identified as contributing to the great loss of life, but in New Orleans, one principal factor was that too many people did not evacuate when the order was given. Insufficient transportation was available to evacuate the entire population. Prior to Katrina, nearly a quarter of the city's population did not own an automobile. If adequate transportation could have been available when the evacuation order was given, would it have been used? While this is an interesting question to consider, our purpose here today is to discuss the role of intercity passenger rail during national emergencies.

Many Americans are returning to intercity passenger rail as a viable mode of transportation as has been demonstrated over the last five years with Amtrak's record increase in ridership. Passenger rail for emergency evacuation and post-event recovery also has significant benefits other modes of transportation do not have. New Orleans is a large city sandwiched between the Gulf Coast to the south and Lake Pontchartrain to the north, with limited evacuation corridors. I-10 and Highway 61 are the primary westward routes to Baton Rouge: eastward, I-10 crosses the Twin-Spans to Slidell, and the Causeway crosses Lake Pontchartrain to the north. During emergency evacuations Contra-Flow procedures are used to accelerate traffic out of the city. But even with Contra-Flow, it takes four to six hours to travel the 90 miles to Baton Rouge. Had adequate bus transportation been available to evacuate those people who remained, they would have contributed severely to the highway congestion. Since trains operate along different corridors, hundreds of people could be moved with little or no impact on the over crowded highways.

Aircraft can move hundreds of people long distances over a short period of time yet contribute to traffic congestion getting to the airport while being significantly impacted by relatively low wind speeds. Airports are usually the first facilities to cease operations when a storm approaches. Trains can operate up until the last moment moving people out of harms way.

But the use of passenger rail for evacuation, as does any successful operation, requires planning and preparation. It takes time to position the trains and their crews to the city being evacuated. As we found out during Katrina, once the decision is made to evacuate, there may not be sufficient warning time to move Amtrak train equipment from other parts of the country. Having

an established intercity passenger rail service provides immediately available resources with known capacity from which to plan and execute the evacuation.

While passenger rail transportation is an important resource for evacuation, the greatest contribution of an intercity passenger rail system comes in the post-disaster recovery phase. Katrina displaced thousands of residents when their homes were damaged and destroyed. Even now, more than two years after the storm, many people have still been unable to return home to Southeast Louisiana. The communities surrounding New Orleans have felt the impact of people wanting to return but no longer having a home to return to. And New Orleans businesses are feeling the impact of workers unable to commute. For the last two years, the State of Louisiana has successfully operated the LA Swift bus service to provide transportation for displaced citizens in communities between Baton Rouge and New Orleans to return to their jobs in the Greater New Orleans Area. The unprecedented success of this bus service only demonstrates the need and value of intercity transportation to the recovery of devastated communities. The Southern Rapid Rail Transit Commission is supporting the efforts of the State of Louisiana to establish intercity passenger rail service between Baton Rouge and New Orleans to provide reliable economic transportation for people living throughout the corridor. The rail service will provide planners with immediately available passenger rail equipment and established capabilities from which to prepare for the next major storm. But more importantly, it will provide an immediately available transportation system to boost the recovery effort.

The Baton Rouge – New Orleans Intercity Passenger Rail Transportation Vision Plan calls for two trains, each with a capacity of 300 passengers making four round trips daily between Baton Rouge and New Orleans with four intermediate stops in the communities along the corridor. The route is owned by the Kansas City Southern Railroad, which operates freight trains between New Orleans and Shreveport. Significant capital improvements will be required to support the passenger train at speeds up to 79 miles per hour. The initial travel time for the 80-mile route will be approximately two hours but will be reduced to one hour and 30 minutes as the improvements are made to the track and bridges. And, as this intercity passenger rail service initiative gains momentum, additional stops and more frequency can be added. Amtrak and the Kansas City Southern Railroad have been enthusiastic partners in developing this new service, and we thank them for the time and resources that they have contributed to our planning efforts.

Fares for the new service will be less expensive than traveling by automobile. The cost of fuel to drive between Baton Rouge and New Orleans is approximately \$12.25. The projected cost of a single ride train ticket between the same two points is \$11.00 with discounts for multi-ride and monthly passes. A taxi from the Louis Armstrong International Airport to a downtown hotel costs \$29.00 – the cost of a train ticket will be only \$7.00 from the airport to the Union Passenger Terminal.

Not only will the passenger rail service contribute by providing additional instantly available train resources that can be used for evacuation before the storm and transportation for workers after the storm, every community along the route will benefit from the service. Large companies will be more attracted to areas with good transportation systems creating more jobs. With a reliable and economic transportation system, businesses will be able to recruit from a larger employment pool. Affordable housing will be developed and public transportation systems in smaller communities will grow to service the commuting public. Shops and businesses will open in areas with access to the rail system. The intercity passenger rail service will stimulate much

needed growth and economic developments in southeast Louisiana. Looking at the rapid economic development that occurred with other new passenger rail services in Maine, Virginia, North Carolina, Florida, New Mexico, Oregon, and California, the Southern Rapid Rail Transit Commission is very confident that this new intercity passenger rail service will stimulate economic development in the region. And, we are proud to have contributed the first \$2.5 million to move this project forward and to have assisted the State in obtaining an additional \$2.0 million for grade crossing improvements along the corridor.

New Orleans and the State of Louisiana are planning ahead. We know Katrina will not be the last storm to hit the Gulf Coast. Implementing the intercity passenger rail service within Louisiana will provide a ready reserve of equipment and trained personnel to assist in future evacuations and recoveries, potentially capable of assisting residents along the extended Gulf Coast. It is important to note this may be possible because the service will reside within Louisiana state boundaries and not as a multiple state corridor. The Louisiana state legislature is able to act independently of Mississippi and Alabama in this effort. To institute a multi-state train requires confronting other, more difficult problems as detailed below.

On March 31, 1993 the Sunset Limited began operating east of New Orleans. This reconnected a major missing link in the national network that had been this way since the beginning of Amtrak. This long-distance rail service between New Orleans and Orlando, Florida ceased immediately prior to Hurricane Katrina devastating the Gulf Coast. The CSX Railroad completed first-rate track restoration in March 2006, only 7 months later. Yet resumption of service has not occurred and could be a vital link for hurricane evacuation for the 12 communities that were formerly served in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida between New Orleans and Jacksonville. In 1992 these four states invested over \$4 million dollars in capital improvements in a joint agreement with CSX and Amtrak in order to provide for significant track upgrades and capacity sufficient for passenger rail speeds and to ensure public access to the CSX Gulf Coast corridor in order to initiate Sunset Limited service east of New Orleans. It is notable that Florida committed the most at nearly \$3.5 million dollars. To date Amtrak has not officially Noticed the train for discontinuance but at the same time they have not made any effort to restore any service between New Orleans and Jacksonville. Noticing service east of New Orleans would be a devastating obstacle to overcome in the effort to restore the service in the future requiring renegotiation of CSX requirements before any service could begin.

Numerous hurdles were overcome to institute service in 1993. In 1991 Congress funded, through the Amtrak budget, a feasibility study to evaluate service between New Orleans and Jacksonville. CSX and Amtrak worked together to identify impediments including regulatory and physical obstacles. Amtrak helped to address local speed ordinances for slow running followed by a long list of capital improvements funded by the states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida. These improvements also improved the running time of CSX freight operations. The states also closed hazardous highway crossings and built stations while Amtrak supplied needed cars for the new service. This was a jubilant and progressive time for all participants involved, resulting in new and valuable service. The commitment of Amtrak, CSX and the four states to work together to assure this service was significant. Our commission hopes this public hearing will help to galvanize and unite the Administration, Congress, and Amtrak to honor the state's investment and support their early and continued commitment to service along the Gulf Coast.

The Southern Rapid Rail Transit Commission has actively supported Congressional funding for all operations of Amtrak for over 25 years, since our inception in 1981. Any intention to Notice the Sunset is of great concern given the citizens of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida rely upon Amtrak to be our service provider, to connect us locally and to the greater United States. The recent philosophy to evaluate long-distance service based on financial solvency rather than as a national transit service is troubling. Long distance trains function as most traditional urban transit systems, to provide a valuable community service regardless of financial profitability. It is well documented that long-distance trains also enhance and feed the existing and developing corridor routes. We ask that the Sunset Limited route east of New Orleans not be officially Noticed and that Amtrak be required to restore service between New Orleans and Jacksonville in an improved form. Such service could be separate from the Sunset Limited, operating between these two city pairs. This initiative will not only restore an additional route and equipment for rail transportation out of the greater New Orleans area and Gulf Coast states in a time of emergency evacuation but it will also restore a critical missing link in the national network that currently forces anyone wanting to travel by rail between New Orleans and Jacksonville to use a circuitous and lengthy multi-leg trip. One must travel to North Carolina and/or Washington D.C. in order to make the necessary connections to reach to Florida. This adds several days of train travel time.

As the important role of intercity passenger rail service is crystallizing in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, all train service to the Gulf Coast should be unwaveringly continued and improved. Therefore, the SRRTC continues to support both the long-distance services and state funded corridor initiatives that connect the greater New Orleans area to the rest of the Gulf South region and the nation. Trains have a unique ability to provide hurricane evacuation for the carless society among us during national emergencies and crisis. The carless society is made up of senior citizens and disabled persons; as well those who choose not to drive or cannot afford an automobile. Along the Gulf Coast this number is large.

Demand for service in the New Orleans area has not abated since Katrina. Households receiving mail, a reliable source of information about the number of returning and new residents, indicates that mail was delivered 86.3% of pre-Katrina households in the 6-parish Area in November 2007. In August of 2005 tax collections by the City of New Orleans stood at \$9,758,559 and as of November 2007 had exceeded that amount, elevating to \$9,876,817. The labor force size in the New Orleans MSA was 197,060 in August 2005 and in November 2007 has returned to 158,793, 80 percent of pre-Katrina numbers.¹ All data trends reflect a steady increase of residents over the months since Katrina. In addition, the region has a growing population of Hispanic people who rely on public transportation.

As New Orleans and the Gulf Coast revive and provide a unique opportunity for rebuilding smarter, a new order is surfacing here and across the country that places a higher value on sustainable transportation patterns. The Southern Rapid Rail Transit Commission believes train travel has a crucial role in transitioning the U.S. into sustainable mobility and should be lauded, particularly in the Katrina devastated SE United States, instead of being marginalized. Congress should create policies that direct greater funding in support of train mobility and sustainability.

¹ Source: Sammamish Data Systems compiled from USPS Delivery Statistics Product; The New Orleans Index, Tracking Recovery of New Orleans and the Metro Area; Greater New Orleans Community Data Center and the Brookings Institute, April 2008.

In 1998 the route between New Orleans and Mobile/Jacksonville was approved as one of eleven designated High Speed Rail corridors in the U.S. In the intervening years we have pursued and succeeded at gaining \$6.7M in federal appropriations to complete a Federal Railroad Administration required Corridor Plan and environmental clearance. We have been working diligently to identify and cost out capital needs that will allow high-speed operations of passenger rail service that could infuse the regional economies through support of business, labor and government. Essentially, this commission has operated with the understanding that we were following the approved federal transportation planning guidance and strategies to plan for mobility, access and freight and passenger rail needs for the next 20 years.

The SRRTC understands that freight rail demands have changed in the 15 years since the Sunset Limited eastern service was initiated. Our commission completed a feasibility study in 2006 of the segment between New Orleans, Louisiana and Mobile, Alabama which, concluded \$260M of investment is needed to run 2 round trips daily at 79 mph at peak travel times with an annual ridership of 90,200, which would compete successfully with auto and air travel. By increasing frequency of the train to 6 round trips each day ridership increases to 327,400. At the same time the investment accommodates freight traffic growth that is forecast. The CSX railroad was a sub-consultant in the study and provided in-house data on freight growth in the corridor to substantiate a 20-year forecast.

More recently and in-line with increasing pressure on states to pay for any new service and to move toward a series of corridor services between city pairs (New Orleans to Mobile/Mobile to Jacksonville), we have asked Amtrak to provide us with their estimation of operational costs to provide service within our jurisdiction, between New Orleans and Mobile twice daily. This was tentatively estimated at \$6M. While seemingly rational to ask states to contribute to the cost of new corridor service, it presents a host of difficult problems for a multi-state corridor such as ours. Most notably is that three state legislatures must agree to a long-term commitment and act together. It is difficult, if not impossible to accomplish given each state has different priorities and funding availability in any given year. For member states of the SRRTC the geography works against us as Louisiana and Alabama have 20 miles or less of track and Mississippi has the bulk of the 145-mile long corridor. Proportionality of cost would need to be agreed upon and if accomplished, should any one state neglect payment, the service could still be jeopardized. Thus the reason for the original framework of long-distance trains, underwritten by taxpayers and operated by one national company. As with the Down Easter operating from Portland, ME to Boston, MA, it is more likely that only states with a great desire or need will provide the funding. In consequence this strategy penalizes a combination of states such as ours that through circumstance have less where-with-all to prioritize this need over the immense number of critical needs identified in post-Katrina planning.

In addition, as the House of Representatives contemplates the companion bill to Senate Bill 294, the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2007, we would like to point out several items of concern. In Section 207, Independent Auditor To Establish Methodologies For Amtrak Route and Service Planning and Section 208, Metric and Standards, the present language may provide a tool to undermine and terminate present long-distance services. Criteria to evaluate trains and ultimately determine what corridors will receive state grants includes 1) current or expected performance and service quality of intercity passenger train operations, including cost recovery, on-time performance and minutes of delay and 2) ridership.

It is well known that the Sunset Limited had one of the worst on-time performance and delay records of all long-distance trains. The communities served should not be penalized for receiving poor service due to their location on the route. As the Sunset Limited was the only transcontinental train it suffered from the frailties and accumulated delays associated with its high mileage. Without adequate frequencies or on-time trains, ridership was decreasing in the last years of operation east of New Orleans. This potentially demonstrates an even greater need to provide a service that serves people, perhaps a separate service that does not run from one side of the country to the other but one that can still be an overall improvement over a shorter distance (New Orleans to Jacksonville). Therefore, the service provider should be asked to solve and improve service. Instead, language in Section 207 could effectively end service on both sections of the Sunset Limited, east and west of New Orleans.

States having a poor long-distance service record today that try to move toward state supported city-pair services may also be at a disadvantage in this legislation. Within Title III-Intercity Passenger Rail Policy, under Section 301, Capital Assistance for Intercity Passenger Rail Service; State Rail Plans; Project Selection Criteria, it outlines that in order to be eligible for capital grants (that would ultimately improve our problematic corridor) “preference is to be given to projects with high levels of estimated ridership, increased on-time performance, reduced trip time, additional service frequency to meet anticipated or existing demand, or other significant service enhancements as measured against minimum standards developed under section 208 of the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2007.” As the methodologies are to be developed based in part on 1) current or expected performance and service quality of intercity passenger train operations, including cost recovery, on-time performance and minutes of delay and 2) ridership (see section 207 and 208) it easy to conclude the legislation is working to defund problematic routes. Title III then could effectively put any state run corridor between New Orleans and Mobile or Mobile and Jacksonville last in line for federal funding.

The long and the short of S 294 language if enacted as written means the Sunset Limited long-distance service between California and Florida could be justifiably ended without the possibility of petition. Importantly, any new city-pair corridor service east of New Orleans, described as best practices by Amtrak today, would not be eligible for federal funding under Title III, relegating all capital investment for any new service to the states. Ironically, SRRTC has advocated for a Rail Title that would create an 80/20 funding source and would provide for a multi-year Amtrak re-authorization. Senator Lott of Mississippi was instrumental in creating and advocating for this important Rail Title. Unfortunately, in substance it is not favorable to the Gulf Coast situation. We suggest that a better approach would be to allow some portion of available funds to be allocated for corridors that are lower performing in order to provide some equity among all routes while enabling the fledging new Rail Title to move ahead. Another suggestion is to include marketing and outreach funding for new corridors service routes that must tackle education and coordination among multiple state legislatures.

While the density of our cities served does not compete with the Northeast Corridor, California and other high population areas, our transportation needs are no less critical and no less important. The national intercity passenger rail system was created to serve all of America, rural and urban, north, south, east and west. SRRTC pursued initiation of service east of New Orleans through the 1980’s and early 1990’s to supply fundamental transportation to communities along

the Gulf Coast and we continue to do so today. Our motivation has expanded in the wake of Hurricane Katrina to include citizen concerns for safely exiting Gulf Coast cities in the approach of a hurricane. Rail transportation has the unique ability to provide this valuable service in a time of national emergency while providing a better standard of living for all of our citizens and acting as an economic catalyst on a daily basis.

Thank you for allowing Southern Rapid Rail Transit Commission to provide comments.