



FED-PP-1: SOUTHERN RAIL COMMISSION

STAFF RECOMMENDATION: ADOPT

PROPOSED POLICY: SUPPORT the State of Florida becoming a member of the Southern Rail Commission and actively working to secure federal funding for the restoration of passenger rail throughout Florida.

BACKGROUND: North Florida has lacked passenger rail service since September 2005, when track damage from Hurricane Katrina led to the termination of Amtrak's Sunset Limited route, which ran from New Orleans to Pensacola, Tallahassee, Jacksonville and Orlando. Restoring passenger rail service through North Florida would provide the entire state with greater economic benefits, improved transportation connectivity, and increased quality of life. The Southern Rail Commission, comprised of representatives from Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, aims to enhance and expand passenger rail service throughout the South. The SRC has been highly successful in obtaining federal funding for the restoration of passenger rail in its member states. By joining the SRC, Florida can work collaboratively to study, plan, and obtain federal funding for passenger rail initiatives that benefit our state and its residents.

Originally formed by the U.S. Congress in 1982, the Southern Rail Commission (SRC) has evolved over time with a vision to *promote the safe, reliable, and efficient movement of people and goods to enhance economic development along rail corridors; provide transportation choices; and facilitate emergency evacuation routes.*

The SRC currently consists of Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi; however, contiguous states – such as Florida – are eligible to become members. The SRC has helped secure millions of dollars in funding along the Gulf Coast, including \$178M in federal grant funding in September 2023 to restore passenger rail from New Orleans, LA to Mobile, AL. The SRC has also identified a project connecting the entire Gulf Coast with services from Baton Rouge, LA to Orlando, FL called the *Gulf Coast Passenger Rail*.

The primary federal funding programs that support passenger rail infrastructure are the Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) Program and the Restoration and Enhancement Grants (REG) Program. The federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), which was signed into law by the President in November 2021, included \$66 billion in funding for passenger and freight rail infrastructure through the CRISI and REG programs, which is the largest investment in rail transit since the creation of Amtrak 50 years ago. The SRC has been successful in recent years securing grants through CRISI and REG to address key infrastructure needs and to support operations of passenger rail service for its member states.

For example, working with local, state, and federal governments, the SRC has secured funds to resume twice-daily passenger rail service between New Orleans and Mobile. In 2023, the SRC and Amtrak announced key project milestones for restoration of rail service within this segment along the Gulf Coast, which will be named the "Mardi Gras Service". While this route segment was anticipated to be opened in 2023, there were delays related to constructing a train depot in



Mobile. In September 2023, the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) announced the award of a \$178 million grant to complete the necessary depot improvements in Mobile.

With a new estimated completion date of February 2025 for the Mardi Gras Service, the SRC plans for passenger rail service to resume with two trains daily between New Orleans and Mobile, with stops in Bay St. Louis, Gulfport, Biloxi, and Pascagoula, Mississippi.

Once the New Orleans to Mobile route is operational, the need for passenger rail service to extend from Mobile to Pensacola -- and on to Tallahassee, Jacksonville and beyond – will become even more apparent.

ANALYSIS: Restoring passenger rail, by connecting North Florida with the rest of the state and nation, would yield numerous benefits:

- **Economic Development:** Passenger rail stimulates economic growth by fostering tourism, attracting businesses, and spurring investment in local communities. Enhanced transportation infrastructure improves access to markets and promotes job creation not just in North Florida but throughout the entire state.
- **Regional Connectivity with the State and Nation:** Passenger rail connects communities, businesses, and attractions, facilitating regional cooperation and fostering a greater sense of cohesion among diverse populations. Improved connectivity also enhances access to healthcare, education, and cultural amenities.
- **Traffic Relief:** Introducing passenger rail provides an alternative mode of transportation, reducing congestion on highways and alleviating the strain on existing road infrastructure. This enhances safety and efficiency for all travelers.
- **Quality of Life:** Accessible and convenient transportation options enhance the quality of life for residents by providing greater mobility, reducing travel times, and offering stress-free alternatives to driving.

Recent federal infrastructure legislation and new investments have increased the prospect of greater passenger rail service throughout the country. As mandated by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill in 2021, the Federal Railroad Administration is currently conducting its Amtrak Long-Distance Service Study of how passenger rail could be extended and enhanced throughout the United States. Fifteen routes have been proposed. One of those routes would run from Dallas/Forth Worth to Miami, passing through Pensacola, Tallahassee, Jacksonville, and along Florida's eastern coast. At this time, no funding has been designated for this route or any of the others, but the study is intended to "evaluate the restoration of daily intercity passenger rail service and the potential for new Amtrak long-distance routes". In addition, the study "will ultimately create a long-term vision for long-distance passenger rail service and identify capital projects and funding needed to implement that vision."

As such, it's an opportune time for the State of Florida to join the SRC and collaborate with the other Gulf States to seek federal funding for passenger rail. The SRC has a proven track record of success, and Florida could benefit greatly by working within it as an official member.

Sources:

- Leon County Board of County Commissioners, Meeting Agenda Item, May 14, 2024.
- Southern Rail Commission. <https://www.southernrailcommission.org/>
- Federal Railroad Administration's Amtrak Daily Long-Distance Service Study. <https://fralongdistancerailstudy.org/>



FISCAL IMPACT: The fiscal impact for SRC membership is minimal: \$70,000 annual membership dues, plus travel expenses for Florida representatives to attend in-person, quarterly meetings, which are typically hosted in the SRC member states.

FAC STAFF NOTES:

- Florida must go through a three-step process for approval to join the Southern Rail Commission (SRC).
 - 1. Florida Approval
 - A bill would be filed and passed through the legislature allowing Florida to join the Southern Rail Commission, along with an annual budget allocation of \$70,000.
 - Governor Approval
 - 2. SRC approval: Once Florida approves joining the SRC, the SRC itself would then move to approve Florida's request. Based on discussions with SRC representatives and also from their comments to the media, it is expected that the SRC will readily accept Florida's request for membership.
 - 3. Member state legislative approval: Finally, after Florida's membership is accepted by the SRC, the three legislatures of the existing member states (Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi) would then approve of adding Florida as the fourth SRC member. As with the SRC, it is expected that the three legislatures will also approve.

- History of the Southern Rail Commission
 - June 1982: The 97th Congress adopted P. L. 97-213 which enabled the formation of an Interstate Rail Compact.
 - Approved by Louisiana, Mississippi & Alabama legislatures
 - Allows contiguous states to become members
 - August 1983: The Louisiana-Mississippi-Alabama Rapid Rail Transit Commission is formed.
 - Commission undertakes feasibility study for proposed commuter service linking New Orleans to Baton Rouge, Slidell and Mobile in anticipation of World's Fair.
 - May 1984: The *Gulf Coast Limited* service begins operation during the 1984 World's Fair in New Orleans carrying hundreds of passengers a day during the 8-month long exhibition. The line ran between New Orleans, Louisiana and Mobile, Alabama. It was funded by Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana and ceased operation in January 1985.
 - 1985 to 1993: No passenger rail service.
 - Rail Commissioners proposed the "Sunbelt Corridor" crossing North Louisiana, central Mississippi and central Alabama. Amtrak conducted a favorable route evaluation contingent upon contract to carry mail for US Postal Service which was never secured.
 - 1986: City of New Orleans grants funds to Rail Commission to conduct feasibility study for rail service between New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast and between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. The New Orleans Regional Rail Transit Program identified alternative alignments and operating scenarios.

- 1990: Alabama Rail Transit Commission secured agreement with National Railroad Passenger Corporation to split the Amtrak southbound Crescent at Birmingham – called Gulf Breeze.
- April 1993: The Southern Rail Commission successfully negotiated the extension of the historic *Sunset Limited* Amtrak line to from Los Angeles, California to Jacksonville, Florida via New Orleans — creating the first truly transcontinental rail line in American history.
- November 1996: The *Sunset Limited* service to Miami is discontinued.
- October 1997: The *Sunset Limited* service is extended to Orlando, Florida.
- July 1998: The Southern Rail Commission worked with Congressional Delegations to designate the Gulf Coast Corridor as part of the FRA High-Speed Network, included in the TEA-21 reauthorization.
- August 2005: Hurricane Katrina devastates the transportation infrastructure of the Gulf Coast.
 - The Southern Rail Commission completes comprehensive passenger rail corridor plans that included route selection, capital improvements, operating plans, simulation modeling, ridership forecasts, costs estimates, and environmental history.
 - Mobile, Alabama to New Orleans, Louisiana
 - Lake Charles, Louisiana to Meridian, Mississippi
- August 2006: CSX restores freight service; passenger rail service remains suspended.
- 2009: Amtrak submits Gulf Coast Service Plan Report to Congress
- June 2012: The Southern Rail Commission hosted the “Bring Back Amtrak” public event in Tallahassee, Florida, and sponsored the “Gulf Coast Passenger Rail Summit” in Mobile, Alabama.
- April 2013: The Southern Rail Commission drafted letters from all "on-route" mayors to Federal legislators and Committees in charge of rail encouraging them to restore gulf coast passenger rail operations to a daily level of service. Additionally, the SRC drafted resolutions for Mississippi, Alabama and Florida TPOs/RPOs to restore gulf coast passenger rail operations to a daily level of service.
- April 2013: The Southern Rail Commission created a new strategic plan and corporate branding to signify a renewed commitment to advocate for comprehensive passenger rail in the Southeast United States.
- April 2014: The Southern Rail Commission submitted an application to the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) for \$1,016,000 in TIGER funding. The funding would support a \$1,270,000 planning project to assess the feasibility of and intermodal needs for restoring suspended intercity passenger rail operations to a daily service level along the Gulf Coast.
- February 2016: The Southern Rail Commission conducts an "inspection train tour" along the Gulf Coast, stopping at 13 stations between New Orleans and Jacksonville. The tour served to examine existing infrastructure and better understand the economic, cultural and mobility opportunities that intercity passenger rail provides. More than 300 national, state, and local elected officials, industry representatives, and community stakeholders rode the train, which was greeted by thousands of passenger rail advocates enthusiastic about the return of service to their communities.

- July 2017: The FRA's Gulf Coast Working Group (GCWG) submits its final report to Congress. Convened following Congressional passage of the Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act (or FAST Act) in 2015, the GCWG's mission was to plan for and recommend capital and operating solutions to restore improved passenger rail service to the Gulf Coast. Chaired by the FRA, the group included members from CSX, Amtrak, the SRC, and local elected officials, state DOTs, MPOs, businesses, and tribes representing interests of communities in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida.
 - The final report identified the Orlando and Mobile services as preferred because they outperformed the other options studied by Amtrak in terms of ridership demand and operating funding needs. The report considers and outlines two levels of investment for restored service: minimum restoration equivalent to the Sunset Limited's level of operation, and improved service that would allow for reduced trip times and enhanced reliability.
- May 2018: Federal funding becomes available through the FRA's Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvement (CRISI) and Restoration and Enhancement (R&E) grants. The SRC works throughout the year to encourage and support its member states in submitting applications for this funding, which is particularly well suited for Gulf Coast passenger rail.
- NACo's 2024-2025 American County Platform
 - NACo believes there should be a coordinated federal-state-local effort to return rail service to its appropriate place in a balanced national transportation system. In this effort, NACo supports expanding and improving long-distance passenger service and providing needed regulatory reform at the federal level.
 - B. Amtrak: NACo believes Congress should continue to provide subsidies to Amtrak consistent with maintaining a reasonable level of service and providing necessary capital improvements with appropriate accountability controls. However, NACo opposes using any transportation trust fund dollars to address Amtrak's financial problems.
 - D. High-Speed Rail: NACo supports efforts to improve and expand regional and national high-speed rail service to serve those counties and regions that would benefit from such service. However, NACo opposes the use of funds from the Highway Trust Fund for high-speed rail and believes there should be no preemption of state and local taxing authority and no negative impact on any current commuter rail funding.
- 118th Congress
 - [S. 4796](#) Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2025
 - Federal Railroad Administration
 - \$292.8 M Safety and Operation
 - \$54.7 M Railroad Research and Development
 - \$100 M Federal-State Partnership for Intercity Passenger Rail
 - \$375.8 M Conciliated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvement
 - \$1.020 B Northeast Corridor Grants to the National Railroad Passenger Corporation (s. 22101 (a) of Division B of the IIJA)



- \$1.617 B National Network Grants to the National Railroad Passenger Corporation (s. 22101 (b) of Division B of the IIJA)
 - [H.R. 9028](#) Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2025
 - Federal Railroad Administration
 - \$288.2 M Safety and Operation
 - \$45.8 M Railroad Research and Development
 - \$298.5 M Conciliated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvement
 - \$1.002 B Northeast Corridor Grants to the National Railroad Passenger Corporation (s. 22101 (a) of Division B of the IIJA)
 - \$1.123 B National Network Grants to the National Railroad Passenger Corporation (s. 22101 (b) of Division B of the IIJA)
- Florida Session 2024
 - [HB 5001](#) General Appropriations Act
 - Transportation Work Program: Within the total amount provided to the Department of Transportation, the Focus on Florida's Future Budget provides \$14.5 billion for the State Transportation Work Program, Florida's ongoing five-year plan for the implementation and completion of transportation infrastructure projects. These projects include construction and maintenance of Florida's roads, bridges, rails, seaports and other public transportation systems. This year's investment in the Work Program includes:
 - \$960.6 million investment in rail and transit projects.
- Economic Opportunities
 - Passenger rail service would:
 - Improve accessibility for the more than 2 million residents in the proposed service area between New Orleans and Orlando, that includes a growing senior population
 - Boost the Gulf Coast economy by connecting the growing population centers and tourist destinations and support diverse jobs, health care, higher education, beaches, casinos, and multiple military bases
 - Provide a critical evacuation route for Gulf Coast cities
 - Provide an alternate mode of transportation for more than 5 million people annually visiting the beaches of southern Alabama alone, with similar numbers visiting the beaches of northwest Florida and southern Mississippi
 - Support growing tourism industry, which has increased revenue per available room by 27 percent in the Florida Panhandle, 20 percent along the Alabama Gulf Coast, 10 percent throughout the Mississippi Gulf Coast, and 51 percent in Orleans Parish
 - Serve the workforce of growing industries such as oil and gas, petrochemical, aerospace, shipping and the military
 - Attract additional sales tax revenue from casino patrons, visitors, and tourists
 - Serve communities with very high poverty rates with limited access to transportation alternatives



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ASSIGNED COMMITTEE: FED

BOARD SUPPORT: The Leon County BOCC supports the restoration of passenger rail through the North Florida region and has included it in its County legislative priorities for many years. This specific FAC proposal, which supports Florida joining the Southern Rail Commission, will be presented for the Leon BOCC's consideration at its September 2024 meeting.

UNFUNDED MANDATE: N.A

PROTECTIVE OF HOME RULE: N.A