FED 02: SOUTHERN RAIL COMMISSION
STAFF ANALYSIS

PROPOSAL INFORMATION			
SUBMITTING COUNTY:	Leon County		
SPONSOR CONTACT:	Rick Minor, Commissioner MinorR@leoncountyfl.gov; 850.445.1914		
FAC COMMITTEE:	Federal	**CROSS-CLAIMS:**	N/A
FAC STAFF:	T. Graham	**DATE:**	October 5, 2026

This staff analysis is based on the proposal as submitted and does not reflect an adopted position of the Florida Association of Counties.

POLICY PROPOSAL:

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. FAC first adopted this policy in 2025 as a federal legislative priority and retained it in 2026. This proposal renews the policy for the 2027 session in light of two consecutive years of legislative progress and the demonstrated success of the Southern Rail Commission's Gulf Coast passenger rail service.

I. SUMMARY:

Leon County is asking FAC to renew its support for Florida joining the Southern Rail Commission (SRC) and working to secure federal funding to restore passenger rail across Florida. To join, Florida needs a state law allowing the Governor to enter the SRC's interstate compact. Bills to do this passed a House subcommittee in both 2025 and 2026 but died in later committees. Since FAC first adopted this position, the SRC's New Orleans to Mobile train started running in August 2025 and carried about 150,000 trips in its first year, roughly double what was projected. Joining would cost the state about $70,000 a year plus travel, would place no requirements on counties, and raises no home rule or unfunded mandate concern.

II. PRESENT SITUATION:

The Southern Rail Commission

- The SRC is an interstate commission created under a rail compact that Congress approved in 1982 in Public Law 97-213. Its members are Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi. Each state is represented by its Governor, a state transportation official, and five citizens appointed by the Governor.
- A state next to a member state, such as Florida, can join if its Legislature approves. FAC's 2024 staff analysis noted that joining also requires approval by the SRC and the current member states. Florida is not a member today.

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Passenger rail on the Gulf Coast

- Amtrak's Sunset Limited served Pensacola, Tallahassee, Jacksonville, and Orlando until Hurricane Katrina damaged the tracks in 2005. The tracks were later repaired for freight trains, but passenger service never came back to North Florida.
- In September 2023, the SRC received a $178 million federal Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) grant to bring back Gulf Coast service. Amtrak's Mardi Gras Service between New Orleans and Mobile started August 18, 2025, with two round trips a day and four stops in Mississippi.
- The service carried about 150,000 trips in its first year. The proposal cites a pre-launch estimate of 71,000 riders, and one news report cites 75,000. Either way, ridership was about double what was expected.
- When the City of Mobile approved its service agreement in August 2024, it added a condition that lets it pull its funding if service is extended north or east of Mobile, citing concerns about the port. That could make an extension to Pensacola harder.

Federal programs and studies

- The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) provided $66 billion for rail. The main passenger rail grant programs are CRISI, the Federal-State Partnership, and Restoration and Enhancement grants. IIJA's five years of funding ended with federal fiscal year 2026, so future funding depends on the next surface transportation bill and annual budgets.
- In December 2023, the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) accepted the SRC's New Orleans to Mobile route into its Corridor ID planning program, along with two FDOT routes: Jacksonville to Orlando to Miami, and Miami to Orlando to Tampa. No route from Mobile east into the Panhandle was included.
- FRA sent its Long-Distance Service Study to Congress in January 2025; the proposal lists the date as September 2025. The study identified 15 possible routes that could serve about 39 million people in 34 states, including 7 million in rural areas. According to the proposal, one route would run from Dallas/Fort Worth to Miami through Pensacola, Tallahassee, and Jacksonville. FRA described the routes as conceptual, with no funding committed.

Florida law

- No Florida law allows the state to join the SRC. Under s. 341.302, F.S., FDOT oversees state rail planning.

III. EFFECT OF THE PROPOSAL:

The proposal has two parts:

- **State law.** Florida would need a law allowing the Governor to enter the Rapid Rail Transit Compact. The 2026 bills, HB 53 and SB 1254, would have created s. 351.41, F.S., to do this, laid out the compact's terms, and created Florida's seats on the SRC. The same bills could be refiled for 2027.
- **Federal advocacy.** FAC would support federal funding for passenger rail, such as continued CRISI, Federal-State Partnership, and Restoration and Enhancement grants in the next surface transportation bill and federal budgets. No specific federal bill is needed.

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Joining the SRC would not, on its own, bring back service. That would also take agreements with CSX, the freight railroad that owns the tracks, along with Amtrak and local and state partners, plus federal grants.

IV. COUNTY IMPACT:

Counties along the old Sunset Limited route, from Escambia to Duval, would benefit most. Other counties could benefit through connections to the rest of the state.

- **Required:** Nothing. Joining the SRC places no requirements on counties.
- **Optional:** Counties can work with the SRC and FDOT on route and station planning and partner on federal rail grant applications.
- **Possible future requests (if service is restored):** Counties could be asked to help pay for stations, grant matches (CRISI requires a non-federal share of at least 20 percent), or operating costs, as local partners such as the City of Mobile did for the Mardi Gras Service.
- **Other considerations:** Mobile's agreement limiting eastward service, federal rail funding after IIJA, and next steps on the Corridor ID program and the Long-Distance Service Study.

Protective of Home Rule: Yes. It does not limit county authority, and it would give Florida communities a voice in regional rail planning.

V. FISCAL IMPACT:

- **State:** About $70,000 a year in SRC dues, plus travel to quarterly meetings, according to the proposal and FAC's 2024 analysis. The House analysis of HB 53 listed no fiscal impact, and the Senate analysis of SB 1220 called the cost indeterminate but insignificant.
- **Counties:** No cost from joining. The cost of any future service restoration is unknown and could include local matches or operating support.
- **Federal:** Joining does not change federal spending. Federal rail grant funding after fiscal year 2026 is uncertain, and the President's fiscal year 2027 budget proposed cuts to Amtrak operating funds.
- **Benefits:** The proposal does not put a number on the economic benefits it describes.

Unfunded Mandate (Art. VII, s. 18, Fla. Const.): No.

VI. LEGISLATIVE & FAC HISTORY:

Passed Florida legislation

- None.

Recent Florida bills

- 2025: HB 833 (Rep. Hinson) passed the Economic Infrastructure Subcommittee on March 31, 2025, and then died in the Commerce Committee. SB 966 (Sen. Davis) died in Senate Transportation.
- 2026: HB 53 (Rep. Hinson) passed the Economic Infrastructure Subcommittee on February 4, 2026, and then died in the Commerce Committee on March 13, 2026. SB 1254 (Sen. Davis) died in Senate Transportation the same day.

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- 2026: SB 1220, the Senate Transportation Committee's transportation package, included the compact as filed in Section 15, which would have created s. 351.41, F.S. The compact was taken out in the first committee substitute on February 3, 2026, and SB 1220 did not pass.

Past FAC statements

- 2025: FED-PP-1, Southern Rail Commission (Leon County). FAC members voted unanimously in December 2024 to make it a legislative priority.
- The policy was retained in 2026.

NACo and other support

- FAC's 2024 analysis cited NACo's American County Platform support for expanded passenger rail.
- In December 2025, Commissioner Minor and 73 other local elected officials, including Jacksonville's mayor, publicly backed extending service into Florida.

BoCC action

- The proposal is pending BoCC approval.

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