



GULF COAST WORKING GROUP

December 14, 2016

The Honorable Roger Wicker
Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Wicker:

Section 11304 of the Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act, signed into law on December 4, 2015, requires the Secretary of Transportation to convene a working group to evaluate the restoration of intercity passenger rail service between New Orleans, LA and Orlando, FL. Section 11304 also requires the working group to submit a report to Congress (Report) that includes a preferred option for restoring service; the reasons for selecting that option; a prioritized inventory of capital projects; the infrastructure, costs, and benefits associated with restoration of service; and potential funding sources; as well as any other related information.

On September 2, 2016, the Gulf Coast Working Group (GCWG)—composed of federal, state and local agencies, the Southern Rail Commission (SRC), the National Railroad Passenger Corporation (Amtrak), railroad officials, and other key stakeholders—provided Congress with an update letter detailing the GCWG's progress. This letter, dated December 14, 2016, serves as an additional update to describe progress made since September and to identify next steps to complete the Report.

GULF COAST WORKING GROUP – PROGRESS SINCE SEPTEMBER 2016

- ***Confirmed and Proceeded to Assess Preferred Option for Restoring Intercity Passenger Rail Service***
 - Preferred Option: A daily, overnight long-distance train operating each way between New Orleans and Orlando that would operate as an extension of the Chicago, IL–New Orleans *City of New Orleans*, with through equipment from Chicago to Orlando; plus a daily, state-supported train operating round trip between New Orleans and Atmore, AL.¹
 - The GCWG recommends that the services above be restored in phases, the details of which as well as the reasons for choosing these services will be delineated in the Report.

¹ Previously, the state-supported service route under consideration was New Orleans to Mobile, AL, but the SRC suggested extending the service to Atmore due to existing relationships with the community. The GCWG did not oppose the change.



GULF COAST WORKING GROUP

- ***Completed Review of Amtrak's Station Assessments***
 - **Comprehensive Station Assessment:** Amtrak prepared a uniform checklist for a condition assessment of the 12 suspended service stations, all out of service since 2005 and located along the Gulf Coast in Florida, Alabama, and Mississippi. This onsite station assessment observed the readiness of each facility and built on Amtrak's assessment performed in 2009.² This assessment included the platform; canopy; station building, interior and exterior; mechanical, electrical, and plumbing infrastructure; as well as fire protection. It also included the improvements needed to meet minimum Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards and operational requirements. The assessment included cost estimates totaling \$13 million.
 - **Revised Station Assessment:** To identify critical station improvements and immediate capital funding needs, Amtrak prepared a revised checklist, one that identified the minimum required for each station to achieve the following:
 - Allow a train to safely load and detrain passengers;
 - Allow passengers to travel safely from the public right-of-way to the train via a safe and code-compliant platform and path of travel; and
 - Comply with all current required codes and U.S. Department of Transportation's ADA standards that apply to facilities used by state and local governments to provide designated public transportation services, including bus stops and stations and rail stations.
 - The revised assessment does not supersede the first; instead, its purpose is to show a phased approach to upgrading facilities along the Gulf Coast corridor. This assessment's total estimated cost for the critical station improvements deemed essential for restoring passenger service is \$7.8 million.
 - **Special Note – Rail Safety & Station Area Improvement Grants:** In support of the GCWG's efforts, the SRC and the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) are working to repurpose \$2.45 million in unused Railroad Research and Development earmark funds for the federally designated Gulf Coast high-speed rail corridor to support rail safety and station area improvements in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama.
- ***Completed Several Critical Meetings***
 - September 29, 2016 – GCWG teleconference.
 - **Of Note:** U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) joined the GCWG to facilitate discussions regarding how passenger rail service and marine traffic can be coordinated. USCG's efforts will include a review of the types of marine traffic using each bridge along the

² Referenced in Amtrak's 2009 Gulf Coast Service Restoration Report, as directed by the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008 (PRIIA).



GULF COAST WORKING GROUP

- corridor and educating the GCWG on the rulemaking process with regard to operating schedules of drawbridges and their effect on railway service and waterway navigation.
- October 19, 2016 – Technical Meeting at CSX Transportation’s (CSX) Washington, DC office with CSX, HDR Inc., Amtrak, USCG, SRC, and FRA to discuss, in-depth, CSX’s operations modeling results vis-à-vis real-life conditions on the corridor. This meeting was necessary to have more informed, detailed discussions on the infrastructure improvements required to support proposed passenger operations over CSX-owned tracks.
 - **Of Note:** General tenor of meeting was collaborative—with all parties gaining a greater understanding of the challenges with the existing route and the improvements necessary for restoring passenger rail, and agreeing that continued collaboration is needed to gain further clarity of operational nuances.
 - October 20, 2016 – GCWG teleconference.
 - **Of Note:** Extensive discussion regarding the importance of public safety and how closures of at-grade crossings could be accommodated. In particular, the grade crossing in Gulfport, MS has a 30+ year history of automobile-train crashes, including many fatalities. As a result, CSX keeps its train speeds relatively low in three Mississippi counties. The SRC, Gulf Regional Planning Commission, Mississippi Department of Transportation, CSX, and mayors of local communities are holding discussions pertaining to the crossings; there is a commitment for further action based on the timing for initiating passenger rail service.

GULF COAST WORKING GROUP – NEXT STEPS

1. Finalize List of Infrastructure Needs to Restore Service in Phases

- The GCWG is using the results of CSX’s operations modeling study, presented to GCWG members on August 11, 2016 in Jacksonville, FL, and follow-up, collaborative technical meetings to identify a structured list of Gulf Coast corridor infrastructure needs for the Report.
- FRA will host a technical meeting with CSX, Amtrak, and SRC on December 15, 2016. The goal of the meeting is to determine what, if any, track/signal changes are necessary and sufficient to resume intercity passenger rail operations per the preferred option.
- The December 15th meeting will focus on the following three locations, which have the most significant infrastructure challenges to be met for restoring Gulf Coast passenger rail operations:
 - Gentilly Yard area in New Orleans.



GULF COAST WORKING GROUP

- Pascagoula area (estimated six-mile segment).
- Mobile Terminal area (estimated six-mile segment). This is especially important if the proposed New Orleans–Mobile passenger rail service is to be extended to Atmore.
- Outside of those topics, meeting participants will discuss the costs and benefits associated with selectively converting controlled sidings to signaled sidings on a location-specific basis, along with a few other specific changes.

2. Agree to Order-of-Magnitude Capital Cost Estimates

- Once the list of infrastructure needs is finalized, the GCWG will develop a final order-of-magnitude capital cost estimate. This estimate will help inform Step 3 below.

3. Identify Potential Sources for Federal, State, and Local Funding

- Funding sources for operations and maintenance (O&M) expenses need to be identified, especially O&M costs for the proposed state-supported service from New Orleans to Atmore as PRIIA requires states to provide O&M funding for passenger rail service on routes less than 750 miles in length. The GCWG is currently analyzing potential funding sources to meet the financial obligations to operate the Gulf Coast service.

4. Assess Economic Benefits of Restoring Intercity Service for the Preferred Option

- Section 11304 of the FAST Act requires the Report to provide a description of the “costs and benefits of restoring intercity rail passenger transportation in the region.” The proposed long-distance route crosses the Gulf Coast mega-region, which is composed of four states, 34 parishes and counties, and numerous communities. The suspended route’s service area draws from a surrounding space that has a 2010 census population exceeding four million. Understanding the return on the needed infrastructure and O&M cost investments will greatly assist funding decisions and policy. The GCWG is currently examining similar studies conducted in other regions of the country to determine an approach to present this essential information.

5. Finalize Report and Submit to Congress for Consideration

- The GCWG anticipates submitting the Report in spring 2017.

CLOSING

There are many infrastructure challenges that need to be carefully considered and addressed before restoring passenger rail service to a sustainable level that benefits Amtrak, CSX, marine traffic, USCG, and the various communities the service will interface with; hence, collaboration—across agencies, industries, municipalities, and states—has been an essential component of this evaluation process. And as such, we are encouraged by the progress the



GULF COAST WORKING GROUP

GCWG partners have made to date, and we are confident that as we draw closer to finalizing the Report, that collaboration will continue. We also want to thank you for your patience as the GCWG strives to deliver a Report of substance that offers pragmatic, fiscally responsible recommendations for restored service to America's Gulf Coast.

We have also sent this letter to Chairman Bill Shuster and Ranking Member Peter DeFazio of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, and Chairman John Thune and Ranking Member Bill Nelson of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation.

Should you have any questions regarding the GCWG's Report to Congress, please feel free to call me. If your staff has questions, they may contact Mr. Trevor Dean, Government Affairs Advisor, at 202-493-0668 or trevor.dean@dot.gov. We look forward to continuing to work with you to restore intercity passenger rail service to the Gulf Coast.

Sincerely,

Sarah E. Feinberg
Chair, Gulf Coast Working Group

Greg White
Gulf Coast Working Group
Southern Rail Commission, Alabama

Knox Ross
Gulf Coast Working Group
Southern Rail Commission, Mississippi

John Spain
Gulf Coast Working Group
Southern Rail Commission, Louisiana

John R. Marks III
Former Mayor of Tallahassee, Florida



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****GCWG Members****

Alabama DOT
Amtrak
City of Atmore
City of Bay St. Louis
City of Biloxi
City of Chipley
City of Crestview
City of Gulfport
City of Jacksonville
City of Madison
City of Mobile
City of New Orleans
City of Orlando
City of Pascagoula
City Pensacola

City of Tallahassee
Coastal Alabama
CSX
Federal Railroad Administration
Florida DOT
Gulf Regional Planning Commission
Lake City
Louisiana DOT
Mississippi DOT
New Orleans Regional Planning Commission
South Alabama Regional Planning Commission
Southern Rail Commission
U.S. Coast Guard
West Florida Regional Planning Council