**Southern Rail Commission**

**Quarterly Meeting**

**Friday, March 6, 2015**

**West Alabama Regional Planning Commission**

**Commissioners present:**

Toby Bennington, Greg White, Knox Ross, William “Billy” McFarland, Larry Watts, Kay Kell, Roy Woodruff, Phil Jones, Brent Warr

**Commissioners by proxy:**

John Spain, Walt Leger III, Michael Jackson, Claire Austin, Steve Carter

**Other attendees:**

Tim Basilica, Dan Dealy, John Robert Smith, Mary Patchunka-Smith, John Adriatiao, Sheila Smith, Mayor William Bell, Mayor Walter Maddox, Wiley Blankenship, David Norris, Robert Smith, Lauren Bryant, Jack Plunk, Baron Coleman, Jack Campbell, Gina Simpson, Pam McDaniel

1. **Commission meeting**
1. Knox Ross calls the meeting to order.

2. The meeting opened with prayer

3. Pledge

4. Roll was called by Billy McFarland and a quorum was achieved.

5. Pam McDaniel welcomed the commission to West Alabama.

**B. Old Business**

1. McFarland motioned to discuss minutes after the Mayor’s panel. Bennington seconds. Motion approved to review minutes until after Mayor’s panel.

**C. New Business**

1. **Marketing Proposal:** Commissioner McFarland introduces Jack Campbell and Baron Coleman from Spot On Strategies. Baron thanks commission for invitation and hands out materials including a marketing plan that centers around the demographics of passenger rail through the Gulf Coast. It would be designed to reach the people who would use passenger rail. Coleman details the phases of the proposal. Phase one includes research, as well as outreach and internal focus groups, etc. Coleman also explains that a goal would be uncovering and overcoming objections to passenger rail. He suggests site visits to each passenger rail location. Using that information, he suggests building a profile of the passenger rail user based on socioeconomics and geographic location Part 3. The final portion of the first phase would include field research to confirm the marketing strategy. The second phase entails the marketing strategy, with a focus on earned and paid media, and engaging editorial board meetings, drafting letters to the editor and syndicating press releases. This phase would also include comprehensive branding, a new website, a tri-fold brochure, promotional posters and both 30-second and 60-second TV spots. The proposed budget does not include the cost of media placement.
	* Bennington applauds the effort to increase exposure. McFarland makes the point that media members attend have not attended any of the meetings for the last year.
	* Mary Patchunka-Smith of Calhoun County Tourism mentioned that National Train Day could be a potential PR promotional opportunity.
	* Commissioner Ross thanks Campbell and Coleman for the proposal and suggests the Commissioners take it under advisement since it’s the first time it’s been shared with the entire group. McFarland requests that a motion be considered before the meeting adjourns, but the conversation is tabled to accommodate the Mayor’s panel.

**2. Mayor’s Panel**

John Robert Smith of Transportation for America welcomed Mayor William Bell of Birmingham and Mayor Walter Maddox of Tuscaloosa.

Mayor Bell explains that his administration has used rail infrastructure as a recreation feature to build awareness and make it more palatable to residents of his city. He also noted the generational shift between Baby Boomers and Millennials who don’t want a car, but do want accessible transportation. He describes rail as a backbone of the economy in Birmingham and wants to integrate other modes of transit with rail, such as bike lanes, to create a dynamic shared system. He also expressed his support of the Southern Rail Commission.

Mayor Maddox emphasized the mutually beneficial relationship that comprehensive rail creates. He stated that for Tuscaloosa to be successful, Birmingham must be successful. The tornadoes of 2011 gave an urgent reason to consider rail infrastructure’s role in their resiliency planning. The current station stop is not reflective of how far Tuscaloosa has come as a city, but he encourages public-private partnerships that can help bolster the rail system and encourage economic development in the areas around the passenger rail stations. Maddox is interested in attracting Amtrak to provide service to improve the fan experience during the University of Alabama football season citing that Tuscaloosa becomes the most populous city in Alabama “overnight.” He pointed to the Mercedes Benz manufacturing facility as an example of an economic reason to increase passenger rail service. Mayor Maddox and the Tuscaloosa City Council have unanimously approved a new multimodal passenger rail station in the Alberta City area, part of the City of Tuscaloosa’s Tornado Recovery Zone and only minutes from both downtown and the campus of the University of Alabama.

Commissioner White asked Mayor Bell about the impact of the World Games set to be held in Birmingham in 2020.

Bell responds that they want to running at full capacity well before the games and that they are expecting a $250,000,000 to $500,000,000 economic impact on the region.

Commissioner Warr concluded the panel by offering the Commission as a resource as they move their rail agenda forward. Commissioner Ross also detailed the resources that the Commission was working on with Transportation for America to be able to provide funding strategies to local elected officials.

**3.East Alabama Tourism and Amtrak relationship:** Mary Patchunka-Smith gives a presentation about Alabama tourism. Suggests looking into tourism industry groups as a means of outreach and selling packages that would utilize passenger rail.

**4. Consideration to provide matching funds for Birmingham to Mobile FRA study:** Robert Smith, Director of Planning from the Montgomery MPO explained that Phase I was completed and that the total cost would be $200,000. Montgomery and Birmingham have already matched funds. The outstanding balance stands at $50,000. Commissioner Ross asks if the City of Mobile has been asked, but smaller cities have not contributed to date. McFarland mentions that match may come from his negotiations with a local Native American tribe and asked what Mobile is planning to do. Ross asks the Commission what level of support they had in mind.

* Commissioner Bennington stated that he would like consideration of the marketing proposal as a priority before other spending is considered.
* Commissioner White maked a motion to fund match amount at $20,000. Commissioner Ross seconds.
* Commissioner Jones asked to clarify which fund the money comes from. He reminds the Commission about the individual state project funds.
* White clarified that the money would come out of Alabama project funds. Commissioner Warr suggested financials be moved up in the agenda to inform the programmatic dialogue.

Ross tables the motion for consideration after other agenda items.

**5. Washington update and report of the status of the FRA application and 2015 TIGER:** John Robert Smith detailed the progress of PRIIA legislation which passed the house. Senate is working a similar bill. 7 amendments were offered including a provision for the inclusion of veteran-owned businesses.

**Notable amendments were as follows:**

**Brownley:** Every state would need a grade crossing plan.

**Lapinski:** Offered an amendment that bikes can be carried on trains. Also clarifies the definition of non-motorized vehicles.

**McClintock:** Offered the amendment to completely defund Amtrak.

Heritage Foundation scored the vote. Smith urged the commission to send letters individually and collectively to those officials who voted against PRIIA to demonstrate that the SRC is also watching the votes. Only $300M goes to long-distance trains out of $900M. $90M goes to new equipment. $200M goes to state-supported trains. Long distance rail isn’t getting anything more than the in the past. The Senate bill will include language to limit $150M to the Northeast corridor so that $150M goes to the rest of the country.

FRA planning grant is still undecided. Smith suggested that SRC could recommend adding other members outside of NE corridor to the Amtrak board to diversify the influence.

6. Marketing Proposal

McFarland requests discussion on an omitted agenda item and asks that the Commission review a motion made to set a special meeting on Friday, March 20 to vote on the Spot-On Strategies marketing proposal via non-traditional means (ie, Skype, teleconference). Bennington seconds.

Warr asks if the vote will be taken in two weeks or if the meeting will provide another opportunity to discuss the merits of the proposal. McFarland confirms that he would like to use the special meeting to vote on the approval of the proposal. Warr voices concern over the manner of receiving the proposals, but with that clarified, McFarland asks for the vote.

The vote was taken with Commissioners Ross, White, Jones, Leger (via proxy), Spain (via proxy), Carter (via proxy), Jackson (via proxy) and Woodruff voting nay. Commissioners Watts, McFarland, Bennington, Austin (via proxy) voted aye. The final vote was no for the special meeting to vote on the marketing proposal.

McFarland details the amount of work that he and Austin have done leading up to this meeting. He explains that negotiating the Alabama dues came at a very heavy political price. Governor Bentley mandated that he wanted to see the existing passenger rail marketed in the state. He also says that it will be very difficult to explain to Governor Bentley that it has been not just delayed, but voted down. McFarland explained that the Alabama dues came in as a one-time payment in spite of the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs — who had previously blocked the dues payment. He reiterated that the governor did a favor for him and Commissioner Austin because of their support during his campaign.

McFarland states that this will be the “death nail” for Alabama’s membership in the commission.

Commissioners McFarland and Bennington leave the meeting.

Commissioner Ross explained to the remaining attendees that much of the work proposed in the Spot On Strategies proposal had already been done and that other priorities — such as the funding resources for elected officials — could potentially be more advantageous for the Commission. He closes that portion of the meeting.

**7. Presentation on the Executive Committee’s visit to Washington:** Ross details the meeting with Sarah Feinberg, interim administrator of the FRA which was the most successful meeting with the FRA to date, and that it represented a renewed focus on the Gulf Coast Passenger Rail service.

* In a continuation of the discussion around the Alabama delegation’s marketing proposal, Commissioner Warr clarified that one year of dues paid would not cover the amount of the proposal and that other states would essentially be subsidizing the marketing efforts. Commissioner Jones said that his nay vote was not a “no to marketing” but a “no to asking for that much money.”
* Commissioner Warr suggested the Commission needs professional administrative help in day-to-day operation and to interface with governors.
* Warr asks if the Center for Planning Excellence can provide a summary of the meeting outcomes for reporting back to the individual governors of the member states. Tim Basilica of the Center for Planning Excellence said that it would essentially be a summary of the minutes and therefore would be very simple to produce. The Commission informally agreed that a measure like this would be helpful.

**8. Report on Marketing and website:** Basilica gave an update on the member state and Gulf Coast one-pagers that were produced in anticipation of the Executive Committee’s trip to Washington. The content was used to make updates to the member state pages on the website.

**9. Financial report**: Commissioner White stated the undesignated funds account has a balance of $349,000. White moved to commit $20,000 from the Alabama project funds to the FRA Birmingham to Montgomery study. Commissioner Watts seconds. Vote to commit $20,000 to the study was unanimously approved.

Commissioner Jones reminds the Commission that dues have previously been adjusted in past years, but that the official dues amount had never been voted on and approved. He subsequently makes a motion to set the dues at $60,000 per year. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Ross and the vote to approve was unanimous.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:20 pm with several agenda items outstanding and the previous meeting minutes unapproved.