



The Peach State XPress

News and Views from

The Georgia Association of Railroad Passengers, Inc.

Founded 1979

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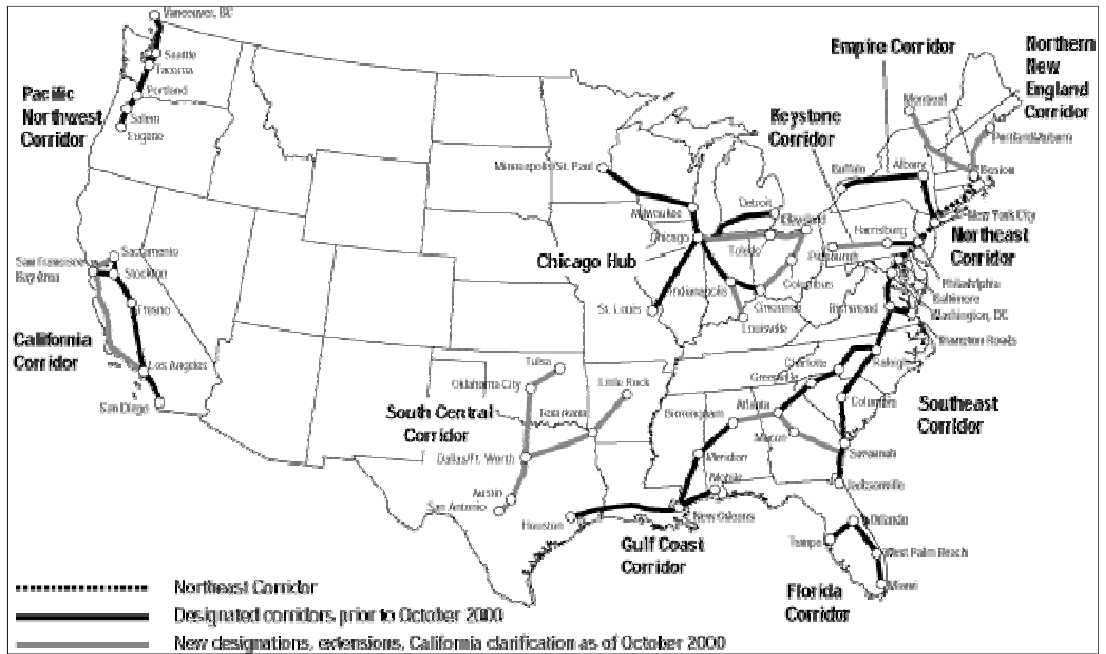
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HIGH-SPEED RAIL? NOT SO FAST!

When President Obama outlined his vision for US high-speed passenger rail last month, it touched off a flurry of excitement in Georgia. A headline on the front page of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution declared, "High-speed rail plan includes Ga.," and Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce President Sam Williams called high-speed rail "a fantastic opportunity for Atlanta." But as encouraging as all that sounds, the reality of the situation is much more problematic. For one thing, the plan itself is not new. It goes back to the 1990's, when Congress proposed ten high-speed passenger rail corridors (see map), two of which would serve Georgia: a Southeast corridor consisting of two routes between Washington, DC and Jacksonville, FL, and a Gulf Coast corridor between Atlanta and New Orleans.



What is new is the fact that for the first time, there's finally some funding for the plan: \$8 billion in the stimulus package Congress passed earlier this year. Unfortunately, \$8 billion won't complete even one of ten proposed corridors, so in an effort to get the most bang for its buck, the Obama Administration will likely partner with states already putting their own money into intercity passenger rail. Here in the Southeast, that means North Carolina and Virginia. North Carolina already funds passenger rail service linking Charlotte and Raleigh, and Virginia plans to start running trains between Lynchburg and Washington, DC this coming fall. Speaking at a MARTA-sponsored forum in Atlanta last month, former Amtrak President David Gunn warned that unless Georgia comes up with a plan of its own to fund rail service, the high-speed line from Washington will end at Charlotte, and Georgia will be left in the dust. Judging from Georgia's "track record," the odds for action are dim. The State of Georgia funds no passenger trains, and it has shunned \$87 million dollars in federal funding for the proposed Atlanta-Griffin commuter rail line. Plans to provide more funding for transportation languished in the Georgia General Assembly this year, and to add insult to injury, legislators ignored a funding crisis that could force the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority to shut down service one day every week. In its May newsletter, the National Association of Railroad Passengers declared that Georgia is "stuck in neutral (or reverse)." Or as GARP President Steve Vogel put it in an interview with Atlanta's Creative Loafing, "The crux of the issue is that we've had no vision in Georgia."

BLAME THE VICTIM. As chairman of the General Assembly's MARTA Oversight Committee, State Rep. Jill Chambers (R-North DeKalb) has a special responsibility to Atlanta-area transit riders. But early this year, when MARTA proposed a simple, painless solution to maintain seven-day-a-week service, Chambers betrayed that responsibility. MARTA wanted the legislature to repeal a law requiring it to spend 50% its revenue on capital improvements. It's a law that dates back to MARTA's creation, but it serves little purpose now that the transit agency is no longer in an expansion mode. And repealing it would have allowed MARTA to spend more of its revenue on operations, thus maintaining current service levels without any tax increase. It was a modest, reasonable request, but Chambers and the General Assembly ignored it, leaving Atlanta in danger of becoming the only major US city without seven-day-a-week transit service. Now that the legislature has adjourned for the year, Chambers is trying to defend herself by shifting the blame to MARTA. Writing in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, she raised the red herring of MARTA's past participation in equipment leasing agreements that were a standard, accepted practice in the transit industry for many, many years. And she ignored the real cause of MARTA's funding crisis: sales tax revenues running \$40 million below projec-

tions due to the recession. All across the country, transit systems with similar funding mechanisms are facing the same serious financial problems. At the end of her AJC column, Chambers made her real agenda clear: she wants Atlanta and Fulton and DeKalb counties to turn control of MARTA over to a state agency. That may be a hard sell in view of the state's utter disdain for Atlanta-area transit riders, amply demonstrated during the recent legislative session.

THE COVENANT OF THE ARC. With Jill Chambers and the General Assembly turning a blind eye to MARTA's financial problems, it's been left to regional officials to save the day. As reported in last month's Peach State XPress, the Atlanta Regional Commission's Transportation and Air Quality Committee has proposed using \$25 million in federal stimulus funds to maintain current MARTA service levels for one more year. Even though the move will divert money from road projects, most people seem to agree that it's far more important to maintain seven-day-a-week MARTA service. The full ARC Board is scheduled to vote on May 27.

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY, AMTRAK CRESCENT! May 9 was National Train Day, and this year's celebrations included a 30th anniversary party in New Orleans for Amtrak trains 19 and 20, the Crescent (photo by John Sita, Jr.). Amtrak also sponsored smaller receptions here in Georgia, in Atlanta and Toccoa. Amtrak's Crescent provides daily service between New Orleans, Atlanta, Washington, DC and New York. It's a direct descendent of two Southern Rail-



way trains, the Crescent Limited and the Southerner, which served the route back when freight railroads also operated passenger service. The two trains eventually were combined as the Southern Crescent, one of the last long-distance passenger trains to be operated by a privately-owned railroad. Amtrak took it over in 1979, retaining the Crescent part of the name as a tribute to the "Crescent City" of New Orleans. "The Crescent represents rail travel's connection to the past as well as its importance as a vital transportation alternative for the future," said Amtrak's vice president of marketing and product development, Emmett Fremaux. The Crescent continues to be a solid performer for Amtrak. It carried 291,222 passengers in fiscal

2008, up 11% from the previous year. And in an effort to further increase ridership, Amtrak plans to introduce a new dining car menu in June that will include regional dishes such as shrimp and grits, Louisiana crawfish, crab cakes and seared catfish creole, along with dessert offerings like mud cake and southern pecan pie. Amtrak's longer-range plans including replacing the Crescent's aging dining and baggage cars.

SUNSET, SUNRISE. In July, Amtrak is scheduled to release a Congressionally mandated study on the feasibility of restoring Gulf Coast service, along a route that includes several northern Florida stops near the Georgia border: Tallahassee, Madison, Lake City and Jacksonville. Those stops were served by Amtrak's Los Angeles-Orlando, FL Sunset Limited until 2005, but the Sunset route was cut back to Los Angeles-New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, and never restored. Reports say Amtrak officials are studying three possibilities: restoring the full Los Angeles-Orlando route, extending the Chicago-New Orleans "City of New Orleans" to Florida, or starting a new New Orleans-Orlando train. A number of issues are still unresolved, including funding for any new train. The Sunset Limited is part of Amtrak's federally funded national system, but Amtrak has been pressing Gulf Coast states to subsidize any restored service. To further complicate the picture, there's also talk about a plan to restructure the existing Los Angeles-New Orleans route. On the western portion of that route, the tri-weekly Sunset may be replaced by a daily train between Los Angeles and San Antonio, TX, continuing on to Chicago. If that plan becomes reality, a separate, connecting train would serve the San Antonio-New Orleans portion of the line. That would seem to suggest that a San Antonio-Orlando train could serve the Gulf Coast route. Or the alternate possibility that Gulf Coast passengers heading for the West Coast would have to change trains twice, once in New Orleans and once in San Antonio.

THE INTERNATIONAL. Britain will spend \$46 billion to upgrade its rail network over the next five years; Britain's Transport Minister, Lord Adonis, went on a six-day, 2,200-mile UK rail tour to visit with passengers, and get a "first-hand experience" of train service... A contractor for Canada's VIA Rail has started midlife overhauls on 98 "LRC" passenger cars used in the Quebec City-Windsor corridor; also due for an overhaul: 21 "Renaissance" cars running on long-distance VIA trains between Montreal and Canada's Atlantic Coast.... Toronto's Transit Commission has placed an order for 204 new streetcars, the biggest municipal contract in Canadian history... Vancouver's SkyTrain will abandon the honor system, and install fare gates at its stations.

NATIONAL LIMITED. "American Idol" judge Randy Jackson headlined Amtrak's National Train Day celebration in Washington, DC; the National Train Day celebration in Philadelphia honored 95-year-old Willie Varnado, Sr., the nation's first black dining car steward... Amtrak says a new Cincinnati-Cleveland route proposed by the State of Ohio should bypass Cincinnati Union Terminal, in favor of a new stop on the Cincinnati riverfront... Work has started on an \$8.1 million track project aimed at reducing delays along Amtrak's St. Louis-Kansas City route... Alaska Railroad trains carried 542,167 passengers in 2008, down 3% from the previous year... When a rockslide closed the only road between Anchorage and Whittier last month, the Alaska Railroad offered free rides between the two cities... The Denver Ski Train, a seasonal service started by the old Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad in 1940, has been discontinued; the most recent operator, the Anschultz Co., sold the equipment to Canada's Algoma Central Railroad.... A Federal Transit Administration study indicates it will cost \$50 billion to bring America's seven biggest rail transit systems into a good state of repair... A feder-

ally funded study supports the idea of running commuter trains between Pittsburgh and New Kensington, PA, but it concluded there is not enough potential patronage to extend the line to Greensburg... Equipment from New Mexico's Albuquerque-based Rail Runner commuter train line made a demonstration trip to El Paso, TX earlier this month; New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson predicts eventual passenger train service between El Paso and Denver... An order of 26 new MARC commuter train locomotives has started to arrive in Maryland... 20 new cars have gone into operation on Washington, DC's Metro heavy-rail line, bringing the system total to 850.... Sound Transit's new light-rail line to Seattle-Tacoma International Airport is scheduled to open July 18... Despite the recession, land values along the planned route of Honolulu's new light-rail line are up 128%... The Metro light-rail line in Phoenix will start selling advertising on trains and in stations... Once derided as a "boondoggle," New Jersey's River Line transit route has generated an estimated \$2 billion in investment and 3,000 new jobs... To honor the 110th anniversary of the birth of its founder, the Duke Ellington Orchestra played "Take the A-Train" and other Ellington hits during a ride on the New York subway system.

DIXIE FLYER. Plans for an Orlando-area commuter rail system suffered a stunning setback last month, when the Florida legislature blocked the plan; opponents claimed the deal was a "giveaway" to the CSX Railroad, which owns the tracks... Construction has started on a \$526 million dollar extension of Florida's Metrorail transit line to Miami International Airport... Also in the Miami area, Florida Tri-Rail fares will rise 25% on June 1... Nashville's Music City Star commuter rail line now runs a Friday evening round trip, allowing suburbanites to dine downtown before heading back home... Birmingham hopes to use federal stimulus funds for a new downtown transit center that would serve as a stop for Amtrak's Crescent... The Crescent was involved in two pedestrian deaths last month, in Tuscaloosa, AL and Seneca, SC.

THE GEORGIAN. Gov. Sonny Perdue has signed the only significant piece of MARTA legislation to make it through this year's General Assembly session, a bill allowing the sale of food and drinks at MARTA stations; it's expected to generate millions of dollars, but not nearly enough to make a serious impact on MARTA's financial problems... Smoke coming from a machine room forced the temporary evacuation of MARTA's Westlake rail station on April 14... An Athens Banner-Herald editorial blasted state leaders for their "hidebound devotion to the proposition it's possible to pave a way out of traffic congestion," and suggested, "a real commitment to intercity rail in the state legislature and among state transportation officials might pay real dividends"... In a May 1 op-ed column in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Citizens for Progressive Transit President Lee Biola chided state leaders for their failure to fund transit... Schedules of Amtrak trains serving Georgia (the Crescent, The Silver Star, the Silver Meteor and the Palmetto) are virtually unchanged in the new spring/summer timetable.

NEXT MEETING: Saturday, June 13, 10 AM

PLACE: Towne Square Condominiums Club Room, 225 East Ponce De Leon Avenue, Downtown Decatur, between Church St. and North Candler St., 1/2 block from the Decatur MARTA station. Building entrance is beside the Subway sandwich shop

PARKING: is available on the streets and elsewhere. If you park in a metered space, feed the meter - the City says they are checked on Saturday. Parking in the Towne Center deck IS NOT FREE.