



April 13, 2021

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Ms. Allison Davis  
Director, Office of Proceedings  
Surface Transportation Board  
395 E Street SW  
Washington, DC 20423

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Office of Proceedings  
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Public Record

Re: Gulf Coast Passenger Rail Service/STB Finance Docket No. 36496

Dear Ms. Davis:

On behalf of our 20-member board and the 1,500 members we represent, I am writing to you today in support of the Gulf Coast Rail. I understand that Amtrak recently filed a petition to the STB to request permission to have operation of twice daily Amtrak Service between New Orleans and Mobile on the CSX and Norfolk Southern track. This petition comes after years of studies and continued delays and we believe it is time to resolve these matters.

In the years since Katrina devastated the Mississippi Gulf Coast, residents have worked alongside local, state, and federal officials to see passenger rail service restored to the Mississippi Gulf Coast. This storm devastated the entire Gulf Coast region and impaired local rail infrastructure, resulting in a halt to passenger rail service. I applaud Amtrak for filing its petition to the Surface Transportation Board (STB) to permit the use of freight rail infrastructure for twice-daily passenger service between New Orleans and Mobile, with stops in Bay St. Louis, Gulfport, Biloxi, and Pascagoula.

This proposal has tremendous support from our communities and our citizens. Passenger rail service is part of the history and culture of Hancock County, Mississippi. It is the very catalyst that built our economy generations ago to establish a viable second home market—the very economic life blood for our local economy. In fact, a recent study by the University of Southern Mississippi projects tourism spending to increase by \$37 million per year because of this service. Since 2005, in the aftermath of Katrina, that market was destroyed and only now, 16 years later, do we see that market re-bounding. Passenger rail service will be a catalyst to expedite the rebounding of this market.

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This proposal is also serving as a catalyst for redevelopment in our cities. The City of Bay St. Louis has plans and funding to refurbish the historic depot district, including the historic depot. This effort is now leading to the complete revitalization of what was a non-producing district in our city. Today, with the hope of passenger rail service on the horizon, outside investors have come in, purchased dilapidated and non-producing buildings, put them back on the tax rolls, and recruited retail businesses and restaurants to invest in opening new businesses there.

This is only one story that can be told from bringing passenger rail service back to an area that has just been named one of the top small beach towns in the country. Reconnecting the Gulf Coast to our nation's passenger rail network can also help revive the coastal economy as it emerges from the pandemic – attracting tourists, facilitating business travel, providing a safe alternative to highway travel, and improving the overall quality of life in Mississippi.

We also believe that working cooperatively with the Hancock County Port & Harbor Commission to coordinate use of the single-track mainline between Port Bienville and Gentilly Yard in New Orleans and the maritime / barge traffic at the Pearl River and Rigolets Pass Bridges is important. We support finding a path forward for both transportation systems to work together.

Passenger rail is an essential and permanent part of our national transportation network. Amtrak has the right to access the necessary freight rail infrastructure, and Mississippi residents deserve to benefit from passenger rail service. Amtrak is prepared to begin operating two daily trains on the Gulf Coast route beginning in 2022. I hope STB will look favorably on Amtrak's request.

Sincerely,



Tish Haas Williams  
Executive Director

cc: Service List for Finance Docket No. 36496