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April 21, 2021

Mr. Martin Oberman  
Chairman  
Surface Transportation Board  
395 E Street SW  
Washington, DC 20423

ENTERED  
Office of Proceedings  
April 21, 2021  
Part of  
Public Record

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

Dear Chairman Oberman:

Since 2005, residents along the Gulf Coast have worked to recover from Hurricane Katrina, one of the strongest and most devastating storms on record. The resulting damage impacted the entire Gulf Coast region, impairing regional rail infrastructure and resulting in a temporary halt to both freight and passenger rail service. Although freight service has been restored, passenger rail service has yet to be reinstated. Residents along the Mississippi Gulf Coast have worked alongside federal, state, and local officials to develop a vision for passenger rail service that aligns with current economic needs.

Implementing twice-daily service between New Orleans and Mobile would provide a huge economic lift to Bay St. Louis, Gulfport, Biloxi, Pascagoula, and other cities along Mississippi's Gulf Coast. It would serve as the culmination of Mississippi's efforts to recover from Hurricane Katrina. Since 2010, the population of the Mississippi Gulf Coast has grown steadily, and an additional transportation option would encourage further growth and improve quality of life for current residents. The groundwork for successful passenger rail service has already been laid, with the Southern Rail Commission having secured approximately \$11 million in federal funding for operating costs and \$66 million in federal and local funding to make infrastructure improvements along the Gulf Coast corridor.

I recognize and respect the concerns relating to freight movement. Railroads and ports are vital elements of the Gulf Coast region's freight infrastructure, and I am confident the Gulf Coast rail corridor can continue to accommodate freight service while also providing passenger service for residents, workers, and tourists. It is time for the Gulf Coast to embrace additional safe and effective means of travel, particularly as the region and the nation emerge from the pandemic. Mississippi residents need this option now more than ever.

I have been closely following Amtrak's efforts to secure access to Gulf Coast rail infrastructure to restore passenger service, including the proceeding before the Surface Transportation Board

(STB) initiated last month. I strongly support Amtrak's petition to the STB for relief. The time has come for a formal examination of the issues that can offer a clear path forward. Moreover, the many comments from Mississippi stakeholders submitted for consideration to the STB on this matter underscore the significance of Gulf Coast rail service as a whole, reflecting both the interest in efficient freight movement and grassroots support for passenger rail service.

Amtrak, the freight railroads, and other stakeholders involved in Gulf Coast rail have already engaged in five years of discussion. Unfortunately, the subsequent report, hearings, and studies have not yielded agreement. Having an informed discussion about these issues must not devolve into indefinite debate. The STB's expertise will allow it to provide an impartial and transparent process for resolving legitimate concerns.

I encourage the STB to accept Amtrak's petition, and I hope the resulting proceeding will lead to concrete steps to restore Gulf Coast passenger rail service as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Roger F. Wicker", is written over the typed name. The signature is fluid and cursive.

Roger F. Wicker

cc: Service List for Finance Docket No. 36496