

10 years after Katrina, Amtrak to make splashy return to Gulf Coast

By John Sharp | jsharp@al.com

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Marching bands will lead pep rallies in Gulfport, Bay St. Louis and Biloxi while a jazz band will serenade a gathering in Pascagoula.

[In Mobile](#), the Excelsior Band will be on hand in what could be a Mardi Gras-themed welcoming.

And all along the Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida Gulf coasts, people will be encouraged to show up, bring signs and wave banners in support of Amtrak's first trip [from New Orleans east toward Jacksonville, Fla.](#), since before Hurricane Katrina blasted through a decade ago.

"There is a lot of excitement about the possibilities," said Billy Hewes, mayor of Gulfport, Miss.

Coastal cities where the Amtrak "inspection train" will stop for 10-minute intervals on Thursday and Friday are planning for as much hoopla as they can cram into a short time frame. The purpose, according to city officials, is to make a good impression as a study moves forward on returning passenger rail service to the Gulf Coast.

"I'm certain this will be fun to see," said Marc Magliari, spokesman with Amtrak.

At the same time, those on board the train – from Amtrak officials, including CEO Joe Boardman, to [Southern Rail Commission](#) members – will be at work. Officials say this isn't a public relations jaunt, but rather a trip with a purpose.

"This is very much a working track inspection," said John Robert Smith, chairman of the board for [Transportation for America](#), a non-profit alliance that pushes for grassroots support of progressive transportation policy in the U.S.

Analyzing alternatives

Ahead of the trip, which leaves New Orleans' Amtrak station at 8:45 a.m. Thursday, a working group, authorized through the recently approved \$300 billion long-transportation package, will meet for the first time in New Orleans on Tuesday.

The meeting is expected to be attended by [Sara Feinberg](#), administrator of the Federal Railroad Administration, and signifies the beginning of a nine-month period for the group

to complete its task. The assignment: [to evaluate all options for reviving passenger rail between New Orleans and Orlando.](#)

Amtrak, in December, [released a study to this effect](#), listing five route alternatives for possible consideration.

Of those, two have risen to the top:

- The first, referred to as "Alternative A," includes a long-distance train that starts at Chicago's Union Station and travels South to New Orleans before heading east along the coast toward Orlando. In addition, a separate state-supported train would travel daily between New Orleans and Mobile, with stops along the Mississippi coast. Amtrak estimates an annual ridership of 153,900 passengers, and annual operational costs of \$9.49 million. The daily, state-supported New Orleans-to-Mobile train would depart New Orleans each morning, then return in the afternoon.
- The second, referred to as "Alternative A1," is for the state-supported portion only, and leaves out the long-distance trip into Florida. Amtrak estimates an annual ridership of 138,300 passengers, and costs of \$5.48 million.

Amtrak's analysis did not include an evaluation of the capital costs for infrastructure, something that the working group is expected to review in the coming months.

"This assessment is going to determine the capital needs to get the line up to whatever passenger rail standards are needed," said Gregory White of Andalusia, who chairs the 21-member Southern Rail Commission formed by Congress in 1982 to advocate for passenger service and pursue grants and other funding to support its mission.

"Amtrak and CSX will look at those numbers and make commitments among themselves," White said. "There are grant programs, as well, that would get the ball rolling and get the funding in place to restart the service."

Theater seating

The Amtrak train will be occupied by traveling dignitaries, politicians and media. Amtrak estimates that about 250 people will be on board.

What makes the trip different from other Amtrak excursions is the addition of an inspection car with its rear-facing seats and a large glass window allowing passengers to observe the tracks. The car is typically used by maintenance crews to inspect tracks for defects.

Smith said the car features "theater-sloped seating" allowing Amtrak officials to observe and discuss "what is needed to improve the alignment of the track" and "the actual physical changes that need to be made which, in turn, become capital expenditures."

"It enables people to look entirely out of the back of the train," Magliari said. "The whole rear of the rail car is a window and there are video cameras on it. And we're stopping at each of the possible stations to see what their conditions are."

"It's time the Alabama Gulf Coast has alternatives for transportation." - Wiley Blankenship

The trip that heads east from Louisiana for the following 10-minute stops Thursday: 10:20 a.m. in Bay St. Louis, 11 a.m. in Gulfport, 11:31 a.m. in Biloxi, 12:16 p.m. in Pascagoula, 1:25 p.m. in Mobile and 2:41 p.m. in Atmore.

In Atmore, a brief welcoming ceremony will take place at the passenger depot followed with a 3:30 p.m. news conference hosted by Windcreek Hospitality.

The train resumes its work on Friday with a [sendoff at 8 a.m. in Pensacola](#) before making an eastward swing through Florida that culminates with a 7:15 p.m. arrival in Jacksonville.

Train stations

Some of the cities – including Biloxi, Gulfport and Bay St. Louis – will be prepared to showcase renovated train stations. Over the years, since Amtrak ceased operations, some stations have been repurposed for offices and tourism, while others have been redesigned for retail.

Biloxi plans to illustrate its renovated station that serves as a "multi-modal" operation from which buses depart for Greyhound trips and public transit.

Biloxi city officials are touting its facility as the "only stop that has a multi-modal transit center right on the tracks" and in close proximity to nearby casinos and MGM Park, where the Double A-affiliated Shuckers play minor league baseball.

"It was built there because we wanted Amtrak to come back some day," said Vincent Creel, the city's spokesman. "We just think this will be a huge economic development tool for all four states. Hopefully, the four states can come to an arrangement where they will see viability to this."

In Mobile, the station that once served Amtrak's Sunset Limited line is long gone, a casualty following Katrina's devastation.

And there are questions about where a new train station could be built. Mayor Sandy Stimpson has said that the station's former site, at the foot of Government Street, could be better suited for other uses.

Right now, it's a parking lot for nearby Cooper Riverside Park.

Mobile's focus

But the Stimpson administration is placing an emphasis on reducing the amount of traffic on Water Street, a busy six-lane thoroughfare that separates the city's waterfront

– which features a convention center, a new maritime museum and the Alabama Cruise Terminal – from the rest of downtown.

An Amtrak train stop would presumably be located east of Water Street.

The Mobile City Council is expected, on Tuesday, to approve a \$238,459 engineering contract with Thompson Engineering Inc. [for a redesign of Water Street from Beauregard south to Government Street](#). The idea is to shrink the number of lanes, through striping and landscaping, from six to four.

The city anticipates the overall project to cost around \$2 million.

Colby Cooper, chief of staff to Stimpson, said that an Amtrak train station could be a component of the overall project.

"What we're facing is all opportunities whether it's Amtrak coming back or accessibility or biking to the waterfront," said Cooper, who will be on the inspection train trip. "The last thing we want to do is, if a station comes back, should Amtrak (return), to not have it reap the effect we want it to."

Mobile could be poised to be a rail hub with its position along the east-west Gulf Coast corridor as well as a north-south route that is being analyzed by the city of Montgomery's planning department. The former Gulf Breeze route, active from 1989-1995, ran from Mobile through Bay Minette and Atmore on the way to Montgomery before connecting into Birmingham.

Wily Blankenship, CEO of the Coastal Alabama Partnership, said he's not interested in looking back – when Amtrak ran through Mobile and was underutilized because of poor performance. Blankenship said the key purpose of Thursday's trip is to look "at what could be."

"I think the world is a lot different place than it was 10 years ago when the passenger rail came through Mobile," he said. "Everything is about timing. It's time the Alabama Gulf Coast has alternatives for transportation."

But even if the train trips were still only a few times a week, [some cities are ready to pounce](#). "Passenger rail is really important to Pascagoula. We have the state's largest employer in Ingalls Shipbuilding and the Chevron refinery. Having a rail service, even if it doesn't run daily and people can catch a commuter train a couple times a week, it would really improve people's quality of life," said Anne Pitre, a spokeswoman with the city of Pascagoula.

And making a good impression Thursday is part of the plan for coastal cities.

"We are not telling the communities what they can and should do other than to have a podium and a microphone," said Magliari. If they are going beyond that, it will be impressive, but it's not something we've created. It's the community's own enthusiasm."