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SAVE THE DATE FOR RUN'S 2026 SPRING VIRTUAL CONFERENCE

By Richard Rudolph, Ph.D.
Chairman, Rail Users' Network

The Rail Users Network is holding its Spring 2026 Virtual Conference on Friday, April 24, 2026 from 1 pm - 5 pm. EDT. The conference, **Rail News and Rumors**, will provide the latest buzz regarding passenger rail and rail transit in the U.S.

The program includes:

The FRA Corridor I. D. Phase Two Panel Presentation.

Andrew Albert will moderate. Panelists include:

John Esterly, Executive Director, [All Aboard Ohio](#), will talk about the 3C & D project.

Todd Liebman, President, All Aboard Arizona, will talk about - Tucson to Phoenix rail project.

Paul Spoelhof, Planning Director, City of Fort Wayne, IN, will talk about the Midwest Connect Project connecting Chicago to Pittsburgh through Fort Wayne, IN, and Columbus, OH.

Knox Ross, Chairman, Southern Rail Commission, will talk about the effort to restore passenger rail from Baton Rouge to New Orleans.

Each panelist will have 20 minutes to talk about their state's projects, with time at the end for Q&A.

Other speakers include:

Azita Kaovasia, AVP Major Programs – she leads Amtrak's Long Distance Fleet Replacement Program, overseeing procurement, vendor selection, and delivery of next-generation trainsets. She will talk at a high level about Amtrak's Long Distance rail equipment order that will be placed in the coming months.

Jason S. Myers, Rail Program Manager at NCDOT's Rail Division, will speak about the Charlotte to DC Corridor.

Michael Weinman, Founder and Director, PTSI Transportation, will give a talk titled "British Rail Fragmented: 30 Years of Chaos and Failure."

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NEW STARTS AND EXTENSIONS IN THE U.S. AND CANADA TO RIDE IN 2026 AND BEYOND

By David Peter Alan

Several years ago, this writer contributed a "New Starts Roundup" to the *RUN Newsletter* every year. There were a number of new lines and extensions opening every year during those days, but the expansion of trains and rail transit in the United States and Canada has essentially ground to a halt. Last year and this year seem to provide an exception, as new services started operating in both countries.

U.S. Developments

Trains came back to a pair of places in New England after an absence of 67 years on March 24, 2025. The "new" service is South Coast Rail on the MBTA "Commuter Rail" system that serves Boston and its surrounding region. Trains now run every day between Boston and the two historic endpoint towns of New Bedford and Fall River. Trains run through between Boston and one of the outer endpoints, with a shuttle between a transfer station

in Taunton and the other endpoint. There are 75 miles of new track, with plans to move the line to its original route through Stoughton, Easton, and Taunton someday.

New Bedford is a historic city, with old houses and commercial buildings, as well as reminders of its maritime heritage (it was Herman Melville's inspiration for his classic novel *Moby Dick*). Fall River has its own historic features, too, and both cities are worth seeing, especially by train.

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RIDING HONOLULU'S FANTASTIC NEW SKYLINE



Platform screen doors (PSD) are at all Skyline stations, as seen here at the Kahauiki (Kalihi Transit Center) station, the current eastern terminus of the line.

By Brian Yanity

I have seen the future of American public transit, and it looks a lot like Hawaii. Work sent me to Oahu at the beginning of February, and I took the opportunity to ride the full length of the new Skyline - the newest and most technologically advanced rapid transit system in the U.S.

The fleet of 20 electric third rail powered, four-car Hitachi Rail Italy driverless 'light metro' trains, run on a completely grade-separated (and elevated) rail guideway. Each station has automated sliding glass doors, also called platform screen doors (PSD), for safety. The [Honolulu Authority for Rapid Transportation \(HART\) Skyline](#) is the first US 'full-length' urban rapid transit system fully automated with PSD, though not the only one in North America. The first segment of Montreal's REM system opened in July 2023 (a month after Skyline) and uses very similar automated technology with PSD. In addition to Honolulu, the Hitachi

Rail driverless metro trains (with PSD at all stations) are used on lines in the Italian cities of Brescia, Rome and Milan, along with Taipei, Copenhagen and Thessaloniki, Greece. Other manufacturers offer similar technology

While a relatively rare sight in North America, driverless rail mass transit lines with PSD are becoming increasingly common around the world, and are now the global 'gold standard' for brand new lines. Smaller automated 'people mover' train systems with PSD have long served major U.S. airports along with a handful of downtown areas and amusement parks. The Sepulveda corridor subway just approved by LA Metro will use similar automated technology from Bechtel (though technically 'heavy' and not 'light' metro), and is scheduled to open in the 2030s. [It should be noted Vancouver started running its first driverless mass-transit trains way back in 1985, and Mexico City in 2016, although these systems do not feature PSD at stations].

I got on at the line's current eastern terminus, the Kahauiki (Middle Street) station, located at the Kalihi Transit Center, where connections are available to three bus-rapid transit lines and over a dozen regular bus routes. Due to the full automation, you can sit in the 'drivers seat' on both ends of each train (like the Vancouver SkyTrain), which I did for the whole round trip. The automated announcements on the trains are both in English and Hawaiian. The trains were not too crowded, though it was the middle of a Sunday afternoon.

The line is elevated mostly at the third-story level, but some viaducts reach 70 feet above the ground. The elevated train affords amazing views for the whole length of the system, with the scenery including industrial and dense residential areas, the beautiful green mountains of the Wai'anae and Ko'olau ranges, the downtown Honolulu skyline, Pearl Harbor, and through about two miles of sugar cane and pineapple fields near the western ('leeward') end of the line. The Honouliuli (Ho'Opili) station, which has a large park-and-ride lot, is completely surrounded by verdant agricultural fields.

The first, westernmost segment opened in mid-2023, and second phase eastward to the Daniel K. Inouye International Airport (Lelepaau station), Ahua (Lagoon Drive) and Kahauiki/Middle Street (Kalihi Transit Center) opened in October 2025. The current operating system is just over 16 miles in length, serves 13 stations, and takes 34 minutes total time to travel end to end. The minimum 15 minutes frequency during is operating hours between 4 AM and 10 PM and 10-minute headways at rush hour peak times. The existing 16-mile system had a cost just over \$5 billion, with funding coming 83% from local sources and 17% federal. The third phase, a 3.3-mile extension (with six more stations) to

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NOTES FROM NEW YORK

By Andrew Albert

Storm Update

The New York area - and basically the entire Northeast - was blanketed by a massive snowstorm on February 22, 23, putting down 19 inches in Central Park, and much more in inland & suburban areas, especially on Long Island and the Connecticut coast. Yet amazingly, NYC Transit kept all of its services running, with the exception of the Staten Island Railway, which was temporarily closed, due to massive snow drifts on Staten Island. In addition, the Long Island Rail Road was also temporarily shut down, as work trains proceeded to clear the massive drifts off of the tracks, especially on eastern Long Island, which got the bulk of the snow.

Kudos to all the workers who removed the snow, de-iced the third rails, and cleaned all the station platforms, which were in the hundreds! On the subways, service was maintained at all 472 stations, all of which were cleaned during the storm. An ingenious decision was made to eliminate express service on the subways, utilizing the express tracks to run de-icing trains and snow

clearing vehicles, which were placed all around the massive system. Keeping service going in the Rockaways and Southern Brooklyn was a tremendous feat, considering how much deep snow those areas received. In addition, over 3,000 buses continued to provide service on the roads in all five boroughs! Plus 2200 essential paratransit trips were provided during the storm! The articulated buses were removed from service, however, and replaced with single-length buses, making sure that all routes were served. Crews were out all over the system, cleaning stations, yards, and depots, making sure everything needed to continue to provide service during the storm was provided.

The day after the storm, virtually all service was back to normal! The Monday after the storm, over 1,000,000 riders were on the subways!

Ridership

Ridership continues to soar on both Metro-North and the Long Island Rail Road commuter rail systems. On the subways, ridership is soaring on weekends, indicating discretionary trips are utilizing our subways & buses! Work is continuing

all throughout the system, making stations accessible, maintaining and improving signals, notable installing Communications Based Train Control (CBTC) on many lines, and making structural improvements to stations and infrastructure. This is made possible by funding from Congestion Pricing, as well as a fully-funded 2025-2029 Capital Program, funded by the State of New York.

The 6th Ave line in Manhattan will finally be getting CBTC, which is vitally important, since 2/3 of the F line - Queens Blvd East, Queens Blvd West, and the Culver Line in Brooklyn are now CBTC equipped, yet the middle of the line - 6th Ave in Manhattan, is not! When this is completed, the F line will see the frequency of the #7, L lines, which are thoroughly CBTC equipped.

Mets/Willets Point station to be made accessible!

New York City is getting three new casinos: one in the Bronx and two in Queens. One of the Queens casinos, Resorts World New York City, will be providing the funding to finally make the

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The Rail Users' Newsletter is published quarterly by the Rail Users' Network, a 501 (c) (3) nonprofit corporation. Current board members include:

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Please send comments, letters to editor or articles for possible publications to the Rail Users' Network at: RUN; P.O. Box 354, Northampton, MA 01060 or email to rrudolph1022@gmail.com

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MEXICO: WHERE INTERCITY PASSENGER TRAINS ARE COMING BACK IN A BIG WAY!

By Eric Clausen

Almost all Mexican intercity passenger trains were discontinued in 1997 when Mexico granted concessions to railroad freight operators by "privatizing" its national railway network. Last year after years of discussions and some early first steps passenger rail development was designated a Mexican national priority with a new regulatory agency being created to oversee Mexico's railway system and passenger train development. Including the early first steps Mexico now appears to have a long-term plan aimed at providing fast and frequent intercity passenger train services that will eventually connect all of Mexico's major population centers.

The first step in this plan could be considered to have been construction of the 1554-km long Maya Train project where passenger trains now serve all planned stations, although there is construction work still to be done. Significant segments of the line consist of completely new track some of which is double tracked with catenary for electrified operations. Equipment for the line is being delivered from Alstom's Ciudad Sahagun's plant near Mexico City and when fully available will include 32 diesel-electric and 10 standard diesel multiple unit trainsets.

Another 1200 km of existing southern Mexico railroad lines which connect with the Maya Train are also being upgraded to attract freight traffic moving between ports on Mexico's shortest route between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and also moving to the Guatemala border. Upgrading of those lines will also permit restoration of passenger train services for southern Mexico communities. Passenger train service on segments of these lines using second hand US and UK equipment began in 2023, but a late December

2025 accident interrupted that service.

Mexico City's limited commuter rail network is being expanded to reach Toluca and Pachuca. Full service on the 58-km-long Toluca-Mexico City line began in February of 2026.

Equipment consists of 30 EMU trainsets which were constructed at CAF's Mexican plant. The line is largely elevated and also uses a 4.6-km-long tunnel. Work is underway on the double tracked and electrified 54-km-long Pachuca line which will also serve the Felipe Angeles International Airport. CRRC's Mexican plant has been contracted to supply 15 EMU trainsets for that line.

The second step in this apparent long-term plan was announced in 2025 and consists of developing what will be fast and frequent intercity passenger train services connecting cities located along what prior to 1997 were the 1290-km-long Mexico City-Nuevo Laredo and the 2388-km-long Mexico City-Nogales long distance train routes. The plan for both routes is to construct (using existing railroad right of ways to the maximum extent possible) new passenger train tracks that will parallel but be separate from the heavily used freight railroad tracks.

The first phase of this new passenger train infrastructure construction is underway and includes the 242-km-long Mexico City-Queretaro (shared by the Nuevo Laredo and Nogales lines), 396-km-long Satalillo-Monterrey-Nuevo Laredo, and 184-km-long Queretaro-Irapuato segments. Second phase construction will begin this year and includes the 263-km-long Queretaro-San Luis Potosi, 206-km-long Irapuato-Guadalajara, and 441-km-long Mazatlan-Los Mochis segments. Third phase construction will begin next year and includes the 444-km-long San Luis Potosi-Satalillo, 204-km-long

Guadalajara-Tepic, 362-km-long Los Mochis-Guaymas, and 135-km-long Guaymas-Hermosillo segments. Fourth phase construction will begin in 2028 and include the 275-km-long Tepic-Mazatlan and 277-km-long Hermosillo-Nogales segments.

The Mexican government's goal is to have all of these new passenger lines completed by the end of President Sheinbaum's six-year term. Passenger train service will probably begin incrementally as the various infrastructure segments are completed and the needed passenger train equipment is delivered. Initial service will be provided by 33 long-haul and 14 short-haul diesel trainsets which will be built at Alstom's Ciudad Sahagun plant near Mexico City. The contract for those 47 trainsets also includes five years of maintenance services.

The new infrastructure is being built to support passenger train speeds of up to 200 km/hour and the 47 new Alstom trainsets to be initially used will be capable of operating at speeds of up to 165 km/hour. According to a government official, "The trains will provide interurban services, connecting cities. They will also offer regional services with stops in smaller cities and communities, operating on rail lines dedicated exclusively to passenger trains. While the routes align closely with existing freight corridors to leverage current rights of way, the passenger trains will run at speeds of 160km/h to 200km/h."

Eric Clausen is a RUN member who considers the restoration of Mexican intercity passenger trains to be the type of legacy infrastructure project that a United States president looking to be remembered for initiating a long-lasting legacy project should seriously be considering.

CANADA REPORT, MARCH 2026

By Ken Westcar

ALTO high-speed rail

Rail projects on paper always understate the difficulty of execution. And so it is with the Quebec City to Toronto ALTO high-speed rail project. The public consultations staged by the ALTO team are designed to bring transparency to the project, but they are also raising its awareness among potentially affected communities, the media and politicians. As we all know from bitter experiences, politicians who measure their performance by vote harvesting, while not truly understanding project implications created by their public utterances, can easily throw an additional, heavy wrench into the planning process.

The City of Kingston, at the eastern end of Lake Ontario, one of VIA Rail Canada's busiest corridor stations is expressing its displeasure at being left off the more northerly ALTO high-speed rail route. Adding to their concerns is that the future of VIA Rail services between Toronto and Montreal appear to be at risk over the two decades or so it will take to build the ALTO project. ALTO, who will eventually assume responsibility for VIA corridor operations, VIA Rail themselves or Transport Canada have so far been able to calm the Kingstonians' justifiable angst.

Bending the ALTO high-speed route south off its current route between Peterborough and Ottawa to serve Kingston would not only be brutally expensive but it might not be technically feasible because of the long curve radii needed to maintain high average speeds. Increased journey times could erode project justification. Recently Doug Ford, Ontario's premier (governor), tentatively supported Kingston's request for an ALTO stop and suggested a more southerly route, closer to the shoreline and the Highway 401 corridor. He was reported to have suggested more stations. Poof! There goes high-speed.

As ALTO digs deeper into justifiable challenges to the project by politicians,

agricultural and environmental groups it is absolutely clear the complexity of the project and, by definition, the cost will continue to escalate. While the Toronto/Ottawa/Montreal corridor would massively benefit from a 200mph high-speed train service, the ever-compounding challenges will require massive political will and deep pockets to make it a reality. Meanwhile, Kingstonians and other VIA served communities along Lake Ontario's north shore remain on edge.

"Northlander" train to resume

After a fourteen-year hiatus, the "Northlander" train between Toronto and Cochrane, ON will return in 2026 using 3 Siemens "Venture" trainsets that were tagged on to VIA Rail's order for 32 units. The first set is now undergoing testing and crew training prior to entering service later this year. The "Northlander" units have enhanced shunt systems to operate grade crossing signals reliably (the VIA units are slowed by CN on certain crossings due to concerns over original shunt performance).

The return of the "Northlander" should drastically improve access to northeastern Ontario for regular passengers and tourists alike and will connect with Ontario Northland's "Polar Bear Express" train serving tidewater at Moosonee on James Bay. Previously locomotive-hauled (with heritage GP38s or repowered FP7s) with a separate power car, the "Northlander", prior to its cancellation, could cope with the extreme weather conditions of the north that include deep snow and temperatures as low as -35c (-31f). Whether the new Venture units can cope with this remains to be seen. VIA's experience is that failure of the main engine and consequently its head-end power capability, without some type of auxiliary power to maintain passenger area climate control and sanitation, poses risk to passengers and crew.

Supporting the return of this service, the government of Ontario recently purchased the 205km (128m) Newmarket Subdivision between Washago and North

Bay from CN. Rail advocates have been quick to point out the need for similar purchases of other routes in Ontario that face abandonment due to low freight tonnage while having excellent potential for regional passenger services. The Guelph Subdivision between London and Kitchener is a typical example. Advocates will certainly be leveraging this precedent.

Metrolinx

Events at this provincially (state) owned provider of GO train and bus services in the Greater Toronto/Hamilton Area (GTHA) can make interesting if not tragic reading. While the system seems to run quite efficiently, a recent derailment near Oakville station, apparently caused by a signal infraction, has resulted in controversy as to how the investigation should be handled. It seems that Metrolinx is reluctant to involve the federal Transport Safety Board and this has raised the ire of those pressing for maximum transparency.

A further issue haunting Metrolinx is deferred rolling stock maintenance, allegedly caused by their divorce from Deutsche Bahn over disagreements over the scope of the GO Expansion project in the GTHA. Alstom, the system operator, has committed to rectifying this quickly but it's unclear when everything will be up to the required standard, due to the very significant work backlog.

Purging contracted consultants from Metrolinx, required by the province while building internal expertise, is proving problematic. Tranches of knowledge depart, leaving internal teams depleted and often frustrated. At the risk of calling this a "Trumpian" problem, it will be interesting to see when the nirvana of a completely self-sustaining organisation can be achieved. It doesn't help that the demand for railway engineering and operating skills continues to ramp up globally. Perhaps a more measured approach to human resource transitions is needed.

Ken Westcar is a RUN member and Secretary, Transport Action Ontario.

FLORIDA PASSENGER RAIL UPDATE: 3/26



Renovations at Amtrak's Jacksonville station are underway.

By David Tomzik

Brightline

Brightline ridership continues to be defined by two markets, long distance and short distance. January 2026 ridership of 288,450 increased 8% compared to 2025 with 25% increase in the short-distance service and 2% reduction in long-distance ridership. The ridership changes appear to be the result of the October 2025 service changes, resulting in an increased number of short distance trains while fewer long-distance trains are operating, with 10-car consists. January 2026 revenue of \$19.2 million was up 14% with a 17% growth in long distance revenue. January on-time performance was 89%.

In February 2026, Martin County and Brightline submitted an application for the Federal-State Partnership funding program under the Federal Transit Authority for the proposed Stuart, FL station. Total station costs are \$87.15

million, with \$69.3 million expected from the FTA funding and remainder contributed by Martin County.

Amtrak

Construction has recently commenced at the Jacksonville station. New high-level platforms, improved parking, station/ADA improvements, and removal of unused mail and express loading dock are planned.

Tri-Rail

State funding cuts for Tri-Rail remain up in the air after the close of the legislative session on March 13 with no budget resolution. The Florida House passed legislation to restore \$42 million in annual funding. The potential increase is waiting on the senate approval which now has to wait until the legislators return in April. If approved, the agency's budget will allow services to continue and avoid the disastrous cuts targeted for 2027.

While remaining optimistic, discussions continue for possible scenarios with new funding sources, service cuts or a combination based on resources.

Statewide Transit Funding

Transit within the state has become a target within the past several years with legislation aimed at cutting funding levels, redirecting transit funds along with funding and operating restrictions even with the use of local funding.

The issues revolve around the passage of two legislative bills, BHB 7031 (2025) and HB 1301 (2024).

With the passage of HB 7031, funding for public transit was slashed at the benefit of business tax breaks. The origins go back to 2009, when former Gov. Charlie Crist and Florida lawmakers invested to expand passenger-rail service in Florida. The first law created a new funding program for statewide passenger-rail projects.

It was added to the section of statute that controls a state tax on real-estate transactions commonly known as the "doc stamp tax." This law set aside \$60 million in annual doc stamp tax collections into a special fund overseen by the Florida Department of Transportation. FDOT was authorized to spend the money on rail-related grants awarded through an entity known as the Florida Rail Enterprise.

The grants have helped both Tri-Rail and SunRail, as well as upgrades to rail crossings to accommodate freight reroutings on SunRail.

With passage of HB 7031, the 2009 law was eliminated along with the \$60 million a year that had been set aside for passenger rail grants with cuts going into tax savings on businesses included in the same bill. With the elimination of the doc tax, the DeSantis Administration used this as validation to cut their obligation to transit thus creating the funding shortfall with Tri-Rail.

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FROM NEW MEXICO

By JW Madison

New Mexico Rail Runner Express (NMRX)

First off, the thing is still running, and running well. Hats off to Rio Metro, Herzog, and their people.

I wanted to publish some useful information and an update about our fine regional commuter train, but I won't have it in time for this deadline. But, as with so much news and information in our train struggle, it won't go stale for a long time. Something to look forward to.

New Mexico State Rail Plan

On March 3 this year, the New Mexico Dept of Transportation (NMDOT) announced the final version of the NM Rail Plan. Here's a summary of a summary:

"The 2026 State Rail Plan is a roadmap for strengthening New Mexico's transportation future," said NMDOT Executive Director of Modal Programs David Harris. "By aligning priority projects with federal funding opportunities, we are building a safer, more competitive rail network that supports communities and industry statewide."

The plan, NMDOT says, prioritizes major grade separation and freight connectivity projects, including:

- **Gallup** (West along the Southern Transcon) – \$44.89 million in Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) funding awarded for a railway-highway grade separation project. Construction start date pending.
- **Texico** (on the NM-TX border near Clovis) – \$73 million in FRA funding awarded for a grade separation project, anticipated to begin in 2030, in partnership with the Texas Department of Transportation.
- **Santa Teresa** (West of El Paso TX) – \$37 million in FRA funding awarded for project design and construction. Design is now under way. **Ed. Note: Look up Project Jupiter.**
- **Clovis** (East Side) – \$1 million in FRA funding awarded for project design, now under way. Construction funding is not

yet identified.

• **Farmington** (NW area) Freight Rail Connection – Continued planning for a proposed new freight rail link connecting Farmington to the national rail network. Timeline to be determined. Inclusion in the State Plan, NMDOT says, "ensures these projects remain eligible for future FRA and other federal funding opportunities."

People, this Plan is big; the Executive Summary alone runs to about 18 pages. The above short list lists what NMDOT envisions for the foreseeable. They're worthwhile enough, if quite modest. Note the absence of passenger-related visions in the above list.

But my 4+ decades as a train activist and my head believe the notion that, if we want to move beyond one expensive (but possibly necessary) plan or study after another, what we should do is to let the general public know what they're missing (which Rails Inc does in a tiny way), and give birth to some real passenger expansion.

We think this could be economically achieved by giving said public what it always wants. **A good show.**

In this case, staging a festive public trial Rail Runner extension between Santa Fe (Via Lamy) and Las Vegas NM; looking someday (maybe) to Raton NM and Trinidad CO, by some bi-state agreement. Free short rides, free refreshments, entertainment—your basic American Hoopla.

This trial should include a cafe / lounge car in addition to the regular Rail Runner consist, especially looking toward longer trips. Even if Las Vegas were to be the terminus of this extension, connectivity from Northern NM to the SW Chief at Las Vegas would increase greatly throughout the Southwest, especially if ColoRail someday gets their proposed regional Rail all the way down to Trinidad, CO.

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The Bids Are In; Choice Pending

MBTA LOOKS TOWARD A NEW COMMUTER RAIL OPERATOR



An artist rendering of a possible BEMU design for the MBTA's Fairmount branch. Image courtesy of MBTA.

By Dennis Kirkpatrick

For the last decade-plus, Keolis North America (Keolis) has been the subcontractor managing the commuter rail division of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA). Having already issued contract extensions, and with Keolis' contract ending in 2027, it is now time for the MBTA to reach out and seek new proposals. Prior to Keolis, the MBTA's commuter rail was managed by the Massachusetts Bay Commuter Rail Co. (MBCR), and before that Amtrak.

In addition to the commuter rail operations contract, the MBTA is in process of assembling a financial and legislative scheme for a separate process to revamp the entire network. The task of electrifying service on the Fairmount Line will be passed along to the company that wins the new operations contract, according to MBTA spokespersons.

Keolis, the current contract holder, has already started a design concept process for the implementation of battery-electric multi-unit trainsets (BEMU) to operate on the MBTA's Fairmount branch. Its 9-mile length is totally contained within Boston city limits except for a few hundred feet where it skirts the Town of Milton, MA.

As part of an agreement with the City of Boston and community activists, the Fairmount line has abandoned the per-passenger-mile fare system as is customary on many train systems, and has been replaced by a one-fare boarding fee equivalent to that charged on the MBTA's subway systems. At one time, the Fairmount line was considered for conversion to a subway service with trainsets similar to those already in use, but for various technical and legal reasons it has remained heavy rail.

The MBTA has narrowed the field of potential bidders to three, and is now in talks with those toward a final bid submission from each. A decision is expected sometime in the fall of 2026.

In seeking a continuation as the operator of the commuter rail system, Keolis's North American is teaming up with the American spinoff of Alstom, a French rail manufacturer. Alstom built the new and much-hyped Acela trains now traveling Amtrak's Northeast Corridor.

The second comes from Alternate Concepts Inc., in partnership with French transit operator RATP Dev, and TransitAmerica Services Inc., a subsidiary of Missouri-based rail company Herzog. Alternate Concepts is currently involved in rail operations in the Phoenix area, Connecticut, and Puerto

the MBCR, a prior operator of the commuter service. RATP Dev claims a presence in 16 countries, including Saudi Arabia, where it operates the capital's automated metro system, and Manila, where it helps run a light rail network. TransitAmerica Services operates *Caltrain*, a commuter rail service that links San Francisco, San Jose, and cities farther south.

The third consortium consists of the American subsidiary of another French transit firm, Transdev, and Transport UK, a British transit operator. Transdev's American division operates in 46 states plus Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico, according to the company's website.

Many transit and rail advocates are also hoping that whomever the new operator is, a part of the long-range plan will be to work towards electrification of the entire MBTA commuter rail system. At present only the Northeast Corridor (NEC), which carries Amtrak Regional trains and the Acela Express high-speed train, is electrified, whereas the rest of the MBTA's commuter rail lines remain under diesel power. The plans for BEMU trainsets on the Fairmount line is seen as a steppingstone toward full electrification at some future point.

Dennis Kirkpatrick is a RUN Board member.

Rico. It is led by James O'Leary, who also led

NEW JERSEY REPORT: A ROUGH WINTER, A NEW BRIDGE, AND A SUPREME COURT CASE

By David Peter Alan

Winter on the railroad in New Jersey was anything but dull this year, and it was certainly not fun for the riders on New Jersey Transit (NJT). It was a cold and snowy winter and, during the second half of it, one track of the new Portal North Bridge was placed into service. Along with that process, printed schedules for the agency's trains might already be a thing of the past. On top of that, the U.S. Supreme Court said that NJT and state agencies like it can be sued, including by out-of-state plaintiffs.

This past winter was one of the coldest and snowiest in recent memory. Two big storms came in late January and late February. Both shut down rail service in the Northeast, including on Amtrak. The New York subways and Metro-North ran service the day after both storms ended, but NJT suspended service those days, ran a slightly-augmented weekend schedule the next day, and returned to the full schedule the day after that. Other rail services and buses were also suspended. So was the Lackawanna Coalition to an extent. The snow closed the Summit Library, where the Coalition meets, on the January and February scheduled meeting days, which forced the "meetings" online. Worse yet, the temperature almost never ventured above the freezing mark during the entire period between the snowstorms.

At this writing, one of the tracks of the new Portal North Bridge is now in service. The bridge, part of the Gateway Program set of megaprojects, officially entered service on Sunday, March 15. Prior to that date, a special inaugural run with Gov. Mikie Sherrill on board took place on Thursday, March 12, and technical problems forced NJT and Amtrak to run over the new bridge on Friday the 13th.

There was a temporary schedule in effect for four weeks, while work was

done to prepare for the cutover from the old bridge to the new. The original Portal Bridge had been in service since 1910. The new Portal North Bridge is higher above the water. There are plans for a Portal South Bridge, too.

The object of the changes was to cut the number of moves in half over the segment of Amtrak's Northeast Corridor (NEC) between Newark Penn Station and Secaucus Junction Station to keep only one track in service there. Amtrak curtailed service, mainly running *Keystone* trains only between Harrisburg and Philadelphia, rather than sending them to New York. NJT consolidated some runs on the Newark Division, but the big change occurred on the Morris & Essex, Montclair, and Gladstone Lines; all lines of Lackawanna Railroad heritage. Midtown Direct trains to and from New York Penn Station, which began running in 1996, operated only on weekends. On weekdays, all trains on those lines originated and terminated at the historic Hoboken Terminal on the waterfront, which has served the Lackawanna and its successors since 1907. Capacity was tight, but there was room for all of the trains: both those which normally ran to or from Hoboken, and the trains that were diverted from New York's Penn Station for the four-week duration of the project.

The new schedule got off to a bad start on the mid-February initial weekend, as some crews did not show up for their runs, and 27 were cancelled. Weekday service ran more smoothly, though, and riders had a taste of the "commuting" and other trips that older riders made until thirty years ago. NJT also sweetened the deal. Hoboken fares are lower than New York fares for outlying destinations, and the agency threw in the New York segment at no extra cost for riders holding Hoboken tickets, which NJT advised them to purchase. Those tickets were honored on PATH (Port Authority Trans-Hudson) trains to 33rd Street (one

block from Penn Station), NJT's #126 bus to the Port Authority Bus Terminal, and ferries to the Midtown waterfront operated by NY Waterway. The ferry ride included a transfer to or from a shuttle bus operated by the ferry company to serve points in Midtown. It is expected that the same service will run again when the cutover for the second track occurs, probably this fall. An unpleasant surprise from the four-week schedule change could be the demise of printed schedules. NJT had "suspended" them during the project, because trains on several lines ran at different times than under "normal" operation. However, when service returned to previous patterns on March 15, there were no schedules in the racks at Newark Penn Station. A check of other stations and since then also showed an absence of schedules. While the agency says that timetables were "suspended," some advocates believe that the loss is permanent, and that schedules on paper will never come back.

On March 4, the Supreme Court decided a case to which NJ Transit was a party. The issue was "Sovereign Immunity": the doctrine that a sovereign government cannot be sued unless it allows such suits, often by legislation (a "Tort Claims Act"). Two persons who were injured in accidents involving NJT buses, one in New York City and the other in Philadelphia, sued the agency for damages. NJ Transit asserted that it was immune from such suits because it is an instrumentality of the State of New Jersey. The Court of Appeals in New York said that the agency could be sued, but the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania held that Sovereign Immunity applied and dismissed the case. The U.S. Supreme Court stepped in to settle the difference between the highest courts of the two states.

Writing for a unanimous Court, Justice Sonia Sotomayor held that NJ Transit

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SAVE THE DATE FOR RUN'S 2026 SPRING VIRTUAL CONFERENCE

Continued from page 1

Phillip Streby, Chairman, RUN's Government Affairs Committee, will provide an update regarding the proposed merger of UP/NS and why we are opposed.

Alice Rodriguez, Deputy Director of External Affairs, the California High Speed Rail Authority, will talk about the initial 119-mile Central Valley segment of the California High Speed Rail Project, which is under construction and projected to start service between 2030-2033.

Who should attend? The conference is designed not only for passenger rail / rail transit advocates, but also for civic and business leaders, environmentalists, planners, real estate developers and members of the general public who are interested in knowing more about passenger rail and rail transit in America. Please note this is a free event for RUN members, but registration is required. A registration fee for nonmembers is \$30, which includes RUN membership through 2026.

Be sure to register by Friday, April 17 so that we can send along the info needed to attend RUN's Virtual Spring Conference. To register, please go to our website to register at conference / or use the QR code below.

All people registering online will receive an acknowledgement from the system, but may be directed to your junk or spam folder, which we cannot control. Please check there for your registration acknowledgement.



We look forward to your participation. In the meantime, be well and enjoy the coming of Spring and many thanks for all you do to support and improve passenger rail/rail transit.

NOTES FROM NEW YORK

Continued from page 3

Mets/Willets Point station on the #7 line - easily one of the busiest stations on the line - FINALLY accessible! People have been wondering why this vitally important station - serving the Mets baseball stadium at Citi Field, as well as numerous other sporting events in Flushing Meadows Corona Park, such as the Billie Jean King National Tennis Center, The Queens Museum, and much more, was not made accessible. It is not yet clear if the Mets/Willets Point station on the Port Washington branch of the Long Island Rail Road will also be made accessible. Stay tuned on that issue!

Feds threaten 2nd Ave Subway funding

The US Dept. Of Transportation has been withholding vital funds for the 2nd Ave Subway extension northward to 125th St, and the MTA has sent a legal letter to them threatening to take them to court if they don't release the funds. The funds, part of a 2023 agreement, are stalled due to federal reviews of contractor diversity(DEI) policies, causing delays and potential cost increases for the expansion to East Harlem.

Judge Liman rules in favor of Gateway Tunnel Project

On March 3, U.S. District Judge Lewis Liman made it clear that the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) Secretary Sean Duffy lacks the legal authority to unilaterally void a program established through a contract signed by a previous Transportation Secretary. Congestion Pricing was approved by Duffy's predecessor, former DOT head Pete Buttigieg, under President Biden. The Gateway Tunnel Project - which will add new tunnels under the Hudson River between New York's Penn Station and the Amtrak/NJ Transit tracks in New Jersey - is the most important infrastructure project in the US right now. If the existing tunnels

under the Hudson were to fail - and they were seriously damaged by Superstorm Sandy - all rail traffic between Boston and New Orleans and Florida, including NJ Transit commuter trains, all Northeast Corridor trains, would cease. So, as of this moment, the project is continuing, and everyone is waiting to see if the federal administration will appeal Judge Liman's ruling. But as we like to say, nothing gets cheaper the longer you wait, and any further delays will likely increase the cost of the project, and of course - change the timeline of getting the new tunnels into operation.

This is the second important project that the Administration has tried to derail, the 2nd Ave Subway extension being the other. Fortunately, they continue to lose in court. Fingers crossed!

Andrew Albert is Vice-Chairman of RUN, the Chair of the NYC Transit Riders Council, and Riders' Representative on the MTA Board.

A NOTE FROM THE TREASURER

The Treasurer thanks the 53% of the members that have already paid their dues. Early payment makes managing our funds easier for the Board volunteers.

RUN dues are for the calendar year. They remain \$40 for individuals and families and \$100 for advocacy groups and advisory committees. If your label still shows 2025 in red, please renew soon.

RUN can be proud of its growth during a period when many organizations are shrinking. We grew 10% in 2025, following 12%, 11% and 15% in prior years. We need to grow more. RUN recently printed new membership brochures. You can write to RUN (P.O. Box 354, Northampton, MA, 01060 or email Richard at rrudolph1022@gmail.com) with the number of brochures you can use to recruit new members when you ride a train, at community events, and among your friends. If every member recruited just one new member, we could double our membership. Let's try! — *Chuck Bode, Treasurer and Membership Secretary*

NEW STARTS AND EXTENSIONS IN THE U.S. AND CANADA TO RIDE IN 2026 AND BEYOND

Continued from page 1

The Midwest features a new start in Chicagoland and two streetcar extensions in Kansas City. Indiana's South Shore Line will have a nine-mile branch, called the Monon Corridor, after its heritage railroad (and also known as the West Lake Corridor). The new segment will branch off from the main at Hammond Gateway Station and run south with three more stops. Service is scheduled to begin on March 31. There will be through trains at peak-commuting hours and inconvenient connections at other times. The Kansas City Streetcar is expanding, too. A 4.5-mile extension from Union Station (mostly occupied by museums, but Amtrak trains still stop there) to Country Club Plaza opened for service on October 24, and a shorter extension at the other end, near the River Market, is slated to open in May.

Moving Southwest, DART in Dallas opened the 26-mile Silver Line, which bypasses downtown Dallas and runs north of there, on October 25. It is not the sort of light rail transit that has been popular since the 1980s and 90s, but a railroad operation on part of the old Cotton Belt Route. Further west, Valley Metro Rail in Phoenix is no longer a single long line, but a two-line "system" with the addition of the 5.5-mile Central Connector, which runs south along Central Avenue as part of the "B Line" and connects with the "A Line" at a new Downtown Transit Hub. The new setup opened on June 7, 2025.

There is a lot of new rail activity in California. An additional 9.1 miles of L.A. Metro's Foothills Extension, from Azusa to Pomona North, opened on September 19. Construction on the D-Line (Purple Line) subway under Wilshire Boulevard continues, with plans to open the rest of the line in three stages, starting May 8 and completing the line in time for the 2028 summer Olympics.

The other new start in Southern California will be the OC Streetcar in Orange County, serving the towns of Santa Ana (and connecting with Amtrak and Metrolink trains) and Garden Grove. Service is expected to begin in August. Farther north, Sonoma-Marín Area Rail Transit (SMART), which serves the Bay Area north of San Francisco, has extended its line northward to Windsor, where service started on May 31, 2025.

There are also new lines in Seattle. When the first segment of the East Link, between Bellevue and Redmond, opened on April 27, 2024, it was not connected to Central Link, the main light-rail line in Seattle. Since then, the line was extended to downtown Redmond on May 10, 2025. At this writing, the connection between Seattle's Chinatown and Bellevue is set to open this March 28. It will run over a "floating bridge" (a pontoon bridge) over highway I-90. A northward extension of the Central Link, the 8.5-mile Lynwood Link, opened on August 30, 2025. At the south end, another 7.2 miles from the former Angle Lake terminal to Federal Way, on the way to Tacoma, opened for service on December 6.

Canadian Developments

There are only seven cities in Canada with at least one rail transit line, although Toronto and Montreal have large and growing systems. There is new rail transit to ride in those cities, and in the Nation's Capital of Ottawa. The activity in Montreal is not on the Metro subway system, which has not expanded since 2007, but on a separate system called REM (*Réseau express métropolitain*), a "light metro" that is fully automated and maintains its hub at Central Station, where VIA Rail trains and Amtrak's *Adirondack* stop. On November 14, CN's former regional line to Deux Montagnes was reopened after being converted to an REM line. Four more stations are scheduled to open later this year, and a new line to Montreal-Trudeau Airport is scheduled to begin service in 2027.

Two new lines began operations in

Toronto, where the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) runs what is often considered the best transit system in North America. Finch West (Line 6), a 6.4-mile line under Finch Avenue opened on December 7. The Eglinton Crosstown (Line 5) opened on February 8, 2026. In Ottawa, the original O-Train line, now called the Trillium Line, returned to service after a four-year absence as Line 2 on January 6, 2025. Two short extensions also opened that day, including Line 4 to the airport. More extensions on the east-west Line 1 are scheduled to open in the near future.

While it's not transit, the other rail news in Ontario is that passenger service is set to return to the Ontario Northland Railroad (ONR). The *Northlander*, which ran north from Toronto to Cochrane, came off in 2012, and the only transportation left in the area was operated by Ontario Northland Bus Lines. Now there are plans to bring the train back later this year, but it will run on a slightly different route, ending at Porcupine, a station south of the mining town of Timmins, and including bus connections for Cochrane. The *Polar Bear Express*, which runs north of Cochrane to Moosonee on James Bay, continued to run, but it will now have a rail connection most of the way from Toronto.

New Rail Transit Starts in the Future?

It has now been about nine or ten years since I wrote yearly "New Starts Roundup" stories for the *RUN Newsletter* and the now-defunct *Destination: Freedom* web publication. This is the first such story I have written since I came on board at *Railway Age* in 2018, and it will probably be the last.

Construction of new rail lines and extensions of those already running have slowed to a trickle, as transit agencies apply mostly for grants to build busways, and only one third of grant applications request help to pay for upgrading railroads for passenger trains or building rail transit.

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RIDING HONOLULU'S FANTASTIC NEW SKYLINE

Continued from page 2

downtown Honolulu and Civic Center, is under construction and scheduled to open in 2031, although [ongoing litigation between HART and Hitachi over delays and unresolved contract disputes could result in further delays](#).

This next segment is the trickiest and most expensive part of the line to build due to the existing dense urban environment, but with very high potential ridership for the same reason. A fourth phase, an extension further east to Ala Moana near the famed Waikiki beach, is planned but its opening date is still to be determined.

Weekday average ridership on the Skyline has grown to 13,000. The total population of Oahu is about 1 million, though roughly one-third of that are the areas directly served (less than two miles from a station) by the current length of the Skyline. The island's very densely populated urban areas have long been ripe for public transit. Per-capita transit ridership in greater Honolulu has been among the highest of US metro areas for many years, an impressive feat considering that it was a bus-only transit system until 2023. TheBus system, operated across Oahu by City and County of Honolulu Department of Transportation Services, had an average weekday ridership at 130,356 November 2025, a 1% increase from 2024, though overall ridership remains about 33% below pre-pandemic levels.

It was a long struggle over the past few decades to get the Skyline built, with [many delays, cost overruns and political battles](#) like so many rail and transit projects, but the project's proponents persevered, got it done, and made the dream real after so many said it would never get done. We were honored at the [December 2025 Rail Users Network annual meeting](#) to hear this story first hand from HART CEO Lori Kahikina, who managed the project on the home stretch to completion. She acknowledged the difficulties that the project has had in the past, and challenges ahead, but said many project management lessons have been learned.

Whatever the challenges and difficulties encountered during its creation and ongoing expansion, while riding the Skyline I only thought about how good a system it is. It felt like being in the future, and it's kupa'ana (marvelous)!

Brian Yanity is a RUN Board member and vice president of RailPAC.

FLORIDA PASSENGER RAIL UPDATE: 3/26

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HB 1301 (2024), created funding and operational restrictions for transit agencies throughout the state. One issue is it significantly impacts Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) by restricting the conversion of existing lanes into dedicated bus lanes, requiring a two-thirds board vote for such changes, and mandating traffic impact studies. Governor DeSantis called such projects "Ideological" and restricts funds for agencies violating state laws.

Key Impacts:

- **Dedicated Lane Restrictions:** The law makes it harder to create dedicated BRT lanes, requiring a two-thirds vote by the transit board to convert existing lanes, along with traffic impact analyses and 180-day notification to local governments.
- **Project Delays:** These restrictions, aimed at reducing "agenda-motivated" lane reductions, directly impact the ability to create fast, reliable, and "rapid" transit.
- **Funding Restrictions:** State funds are prohibited for marketing or advertising on transit vehicles. Additionally, state funding can be withheld from transit agencies that violate certain state laws, such as pandemic-related mask mandates.
- **Operational Requirements:** Public transit agencies must meet new, strict reporting requirements regarding their administrative and overhead costs, which, if not met, could impact funding.
- **Vehicle Constraints:** Transit vehicles are prohibited from using state funds for, or displaying, political messages or "ideological" content, limiting ads to branding or state public service announcements.

- **Administrative Oversight:** The law requires transit agencies to report on administrative costs, with increases of 5% or more requiring approval from the Florida Department of Transportation.
- **Future Rail Development:** The law directs the Florida Rail Enterprise to acquire future rail corridors, in coordination with the state highway system.

The Florida Public Transit Association's 2026 legislative platform includes reversing the language in HB7031 and 1301, creating a permanent increase to the transit trust fund and restoring previous funding cuts. With the legislative session going into April 2026, these issues have not been resolved.

Jacksonville Skyway

The Jacksonville Transportation Authority (JTA) operates the 2.5-mile automated skyway serving 8 stations spanning both sides of the St. Johns River. The line starts at the LaVilla Multi-modal station serving JTA bus hub, Greyhound and is across from the Prime Osborn Convention Center, the former Union Station terminal, which the city wants to restore rail passenger service to the station.

The JTA is evaluating five options for the future of the downtown Skyway. The project is known as the U²C Phase II Skyway Rehabilitation and Downtown Expansion Project Development & Environment (PD&E) Study. JTA is gathering public input on these options through early 2026 before proceeding with the next phase of the U²C, supported by a \$247 million investment plan.

Proposed Skyway Options

- **Option 1: Rehabilitate Existing System:** Repair and retrofit the current monorail cars to continue the existing service.
- **Option 2: New Automated People Movers:** Replace current cars with a new, modern fleet of autonomous trains.
- **Option 3: Convert to Elevated AV Roadway:** Convert the existing elevated guideway into a dedicated road for Autonomous Vehicles (AVs), enabling them to travel beyond the downtown core.

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THE ONGOING EFFORT TO RESTORE PASSENGER SERVICE FROM BATON ROUGE, LA TO NEW ORLEANS

By Richard Rudolph, Ph.D.
Chairman, Rail Users' Network

This is the third in a series of articles regarding how the FRA Corridor I.D. program has sparked renewed interest in re-establishing passenger service at the state level. Although the Kansas City's *Southern Belle*, the last passenger train, ended service between Baton Rouge and New Orleans in 1969, it wasn't long before there was renewed interest in passenger rail. It was sparked by the energy crisis of 1979 and the 1984 Louisiana World Exposition/World's Fair. The Louisiana-Mississippi-Alabama Rapid Rail Transit Coalition, which was formed in 1983 to study and implement commuter rail service, actually operated the short-lived "Gulf Coast Limited" during the 1984 World's Fair. While the service was short-lived, the organization has lived on as the Southern Rail Commission, which is focused on restoring passenger rail service along the Gulf Coast.

For decades since then, there has been talk of restoring passenger rail service between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. In 2008, when the Obama Administration announced the High-Speed Intercity Passenger Rail Program, the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development (LaDOTD) prepared a plan to seek \$300 million to build a high speed passenger rail link between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, LA. Republican Governor Bobby Jindal, however, ultimately rejected the federal stimulus money from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, claiming the plan to return rail service was too expensive and would cost \$470 million to build and require an \$18 million annual operating subsidy.

Although the plan was axed, officials in the two cities still wanted to create a passenger rail connection. As a result, the New Orleans Regional Planning Commission, Baton Rouge's Capital Region Planning Commission and the Baton Rouge Area Foundation in January 2013

contracted the HNTB Corporation to conduct a feasibility study, which was "a partnership, primarily funded by the Southern Rail Commission". The study, completed in February 2014, included an assessment of the existing infrastructure and recommended a number of improvements based on four service plans that also outlined how the service could be implemented through phases. It included a feasibility-level analysis for stations, ridership and revenue, capital, operating and maintenance costs and financial options.

Two daily roundtrips traveling at speeds up to 79 miles per hour from Baton Rouge Downtown and Health District in Baton Rouge were envisioned, along with station stops in Gonzales, LaPlace, Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport and the Union Passenger Terminal next to the Superdome in New Orleans. The study pointed out that passenger rail service would provide an attractive and reliable alternative to auto travel and the development of the service would also function as one of the key segments in the creation of a regional network of passenger rail service from Houston to New Orleans and Mobile and Atlanta. It would also serve as an economic engine by offering improved access to jobs, development opportunities and enhanced access to the numerous tourist attractions and special events along the corridor. Passenger rail could also be part of an evacuation strategy to safety and can move large numbers of people out of Greater New Orleans if disasters posed a threat, including ambulatory medical patients who can be removed to Baton Rouge.

The HNTB study estimated start-up costs at about \$260 million, with annual operating subsidies of about \$9 million. Both figures were about half of what a high-speed service would have cost. The largest savings would be derived by utilizing the existing 80 timber bridges rather than replacing them with steel and concrete structures, which would be needed to operate at 110 mph. The

largest capital project associated with the proposed new service was pegged at \$60 million to replace the two-mile rail bridge across the Bonnet Carre Spillway, which enables floodwaters from the Mississippi River to flow into Lake Pontchartrain.

In its final report, the project team involved in the feasibility study pointed out that they had met with a wide variety of stakeholder groups to discuss the proposed rail service and recommended that this collaborative approach with elected officials and key stakeholders should be continued to develop a broad base of support to move this rail service to implementation. Given this recommendation, it is not at all surprising that the Southern Rail Commission, the Baton Rouge Area Chamber and the Greater New Orleans, Inc would conduct a poll in 2019 to gauge residents' support for restoring passenger rail between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. The poll showed that over 80% responded favorably that rail service between New Orleans and Baton Rouge was important to them, for it would bring economic development and reduce congestion on I-10, and 63% said they would actually use the train.

Since 2019, a lot has happened to move the project forward, ensuring that passenger service between the two cities may finally happen by the end of this decade or a few years later. Several Parishes along the rail corridor have received grant funding from the SRC for planning station stops and the cities of Baton Rouge and Gonzales have been awarded a \$20 million federal Raise grant for real estate acquisition and for the design and construction of the Baton Rouge and Gonzales railroad stations. Several other Parishes have also received grants to begin building stations, using federal grant funds such as CRISI, TOD/RIFF REHAB and Opportunity Zone funding.

In 2021, Amtrak included the proposed service in its 15-year "Amtrak Connects
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THE ONGOING EFFORT TO RESTORE PASSENGER SERVICE FROM BATON ROUGE, LA TO NEW ORLEANS

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US" expansion plan and reached an agreement to cooperate with the Canadian Pacific Railroad, which was filed with the Surface Transportation Board. This agreement included several good faith commitments regarding what would be required for the start-up of the service, such as cooperating in securing funds for improvements and implementing them as promptly as possible. As a result of the merger between CP and Kansas City Southern, which the Surface Transportation Board approved in 2023, the new CPKC railroad agreed to allow Amtrak to add new passenger service over the KCS-owned lines between New Orleans and Baton Rouge.

In June 2022, the Louisiana legislature approved \$37.5 million for the project to meet federal dollar matching obligations. In August, U.S.DOT awarded a \$20 million RAISE grant to design and construct the Baton Rouge and Gonzales train stations, and Baton Rouge agreed to contribute \$3.25 million towards this project. The Louisiana Legislature also passed, and Governor John Bel Edwards signed, Act 764, directing LaDOTD to prepare the scope, schedule, and budget to secure all necessary approvals and permits to begin passenger rail service between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, in order to identify a process for moving the project forward to implementation.

A new feasibility study completed in 2023 provided an inventory of previous and ongoing efforts to reestablish passenger rail between the two largest cities in Louisiana, and to connect Baton Rouge to long-distance Amtrak services such as the *Crescent*, the *City of New Orleans* and the *Sunset Limited*. The study also identified infrastructure that needed improvements to introduce the new rail service between the two cities and "evaluated the constraints, challenges and opportunities for initial and sustainable passenger operations in the corridor." It pointed out that the project would not only need

consistent, reliable state operating funds to support the service, but also funds to replace the two-mile-long Bonnet Carré Spillway railroad bridge, which was built in 1927. Given its current condition, all rail traffic on the bridge is speed-restricted to 10 mph to minimize impact on the structure. This speed restriction results in trains taking approximately twelve minutes to cross the bridge.

In March 2023, the Southern Rail Commission submitted an application to the F.R.A. Corridor Program. A month later, Governor Edwards promoted the project by riding on an inspection train over the proposed route. In December 2023, Governor Edwards signed the agreement for the New Orleans-Baton Rouge passenger rail service and announced the plan would begin in 2024. Meanwhile, the FRA accepted the application to enter the New Orleans-Baton Rouge Route into the FRA Corridor I.D. program.

The new elected Republican Governor, Jeff Landry, took over in January 2024, but this change wasn't expected to affect the train project. Although he was not opposed to establishing passenger rail service between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, he favored fixing roads, especially to widen both sides of Interstate 10 to three lanes along the proposed passenger rail route.

John Spain, a member of the SCR and senior adviser to the Baton Rouge Area Foundation, has reminded supporters that federal funding is provided in different pots. There's a pot for highways and there's a pot for railroad.

"The highway money doesn't take away from the railroad money and vice versa." Spain pointed out that the I-10 project and the passenger rail project are complementary, not mutually exclusive. "That's because passenger rail service could help alleviate traffic congestion while the I-10 work is carried out as well as after that work has been completed... When you look at the future of transportation in our state, you can continue to improve existing highways while also looking at a multimodal solution that might include passenger rail," Spain said. "You can have the best of both worlds—using passenger rail service to take some of the traffic off of the

interstate both at its current width and even after additional lanes are added."

Because a detailed feasibility study was already completed and updated in 2023, the FRA considered the initial scoping (step 1) complete and has allowed the project to move directly into step 2 activities. In step 2, however, the project must provide a 10% match to access further federal funds to complete a service development plan. Upon its completion, the project will advance to step 3: preliminary engineering and environmental review.

The Chairman of the Southern Rail Commission, Knox Ross, is also very positive about the potential success of the proposed new service. Since Mardi Gras rail service began running in August of 2025, it's been a resounding success for Amtrak and that could bode well for a potential expansion of the service to eventually include Baton Rouge. "Amtrak's estimate for the first year was 71,000 riders. This year, we've hit 74,000 riders in only six months," Ross stated.

Currently, the train service operates twice daily between the New Orleans Passenger Terminal and Mobile, AL with stops included in Bay St. Louis, Gulfport, Biloxi, and Pascagoula. Riders are encouraged to experience the food, bars, and culture each stop has to offer while safely getting from place to place. Ross says the continued growth of ridership on the Mardi Gras rail service could help to bring trains deeper into Louisiana, offering the regional experience to a whole new ridership.

He believes the success of this Mardi Gras service bodes well, for it would be a great complement to this service to be able to add a Baton Rouge to Mobile, AL corridor. With Mardi Gras rail service drawing roughly double the ridership that was projected last year, the future looks bright for possible expansion.

While it is far too soon to predict an actual start-up date when passenger rail will be restored from Baton Rouge to New Orleans, this corridor project is certainly one that will most likely succeed, given the work of the SRC and the public support that it has been able to create over the past decades.

PHILADELPHIA UPDATE

By Chuck Bode

The past three months have been routine here. SEPTA eventually leased 10 cars from MARC and repaired most of the Silverliner IV cars. On February 1, new railroad timetables returned express service. SEPTA also managed to get the Subway Surface trolleys (routes 10, 11, 13, 34, and 36 now called T1, T4, T3, T2, and T5) back in the tunnel most of the day. Trolleys continue on the diversion route overnight to allow time for the remaining repairs.

Once again, Pennsylvania begins the budget process, again apparently without provision for adequate public transit funding. Fortunately, SEPTA and PAT, in Pittsburgh, are continuing to use capital funds to pay for operations. Intense activism by local advocates in Philadelphia succeeded in increasing funds for SEPTA in the City's initial budget proposal.

Chuck Bode is a RUN Board member.

NEW JERSEY REPORT: A ROUGH WINTER, A NEW BRIDGE, AND A SUPREME COURT CASE

Continued from page 9

was created as an independent body with its own corporate identity, rather than being "an arm of the State." Therefore, despite the large amount of control that the State exercises over the agency, NJT is independent of the State itself, so Sovereign Immunity does not apply and out-of-state plaintiffs can file suits against it.

Other transit agencies, such as New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), are also State agencies and, if the same principle also applies to them, plaintiffs can sue them for damages. The same would also hold for State agencies other than transit providers, if the states established them with independent identities. NJ Transit says the agency will honor the Court's decision.

It's also budget season at the New Jersey Legislature. NJ Transit's current level of service got a reprieve until the end of 2028, when the state enacted a surcharge on the largest corporations two years ago to keep transit operations going without severe service cuts. The Lackawanna Coalition's statement prepared for the budget hearings called for the levy to be renewed when it is set to expire. In addition, the Coalition suggested some uses for the agency's operating funds: hourly weekend service (instead of only every two hours) on the North Jersey Coast Line south of Long Branch and between Hoboken and Montclair State Station, which would connect in both directions with the Morris & Essex (M&E) Line between Dover and New York. On the capital side, the Coalition called for additional passing sidings on the Pascack Valley Line and the Gladstone Branch, which diverges from the M&E Line at Summit.

David Peter Alan is a RUN Board member. In addition to his New Jersey activities with the Lackawanna Coalition and the Senior Citizens and Disabled Residents Transportation Advisory Committee (SCDRTAC) at NJ Transit, he is also a Contributing Editor at Railway Age. His article on the Portal North Cutover, at <https://www.railwayage.com/passenger/commuterregional/for-njt-a-relatively-smooth-portal-north-cutover-startup/?RACHannel=home>, was posted on February 24.

FLORIDA PASSENGER RAIL UPDATE

Continued from page 12

- **Option 4: Demolish & Convert to Street Level:** Demolish the elevated structure and replace it with street-level autonomous shuttle services.
- **Option 5: Convert to Multi-Use Trail:** Repurpose the elevated structure into a pedestrian and bicycle trail connecting to existing and other planned trails.

David Tomzik is a RUN Board member and part of the Florida Coalition of Rail Passengers.

FROM NEW MEXICO

Continued from page 7

A lot of good things in this world start out with pipe dreams.

After reading the above summary of a summary, here's where you go to read or scan the whole thing:

https://www.railwayage.com/regulatory/nmdot-finalizes-2026-state-rail-plan/?utm_source=&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=56454

Hope the NMDOT map is useful, especially when reading the above list.

J.W. Madison is a RUN Board member and president of Rails Inc, based in Albuquerque, NM.

NEW STARTS AND EXTENSIONS

Continued from page 11

Still, this is a moment to savor, as several regions of the United States and three major lines, cities in Canada are now hosting new train or rail transit and more are set to open for service later this year. Seattle and Los Angeles have ambitious plans for expanding their rail systems over the next 30 years or so, but they are exceptions.

At this writing, I have ridden a number of the new lines that I mentioned here and have plans to ride the others after they open. Riding a new line is not an experience any of us get to enjoy very often, but there are opportunities this year. So, as the weather warms up, this year will be a good time to ride.

The author is a RUN Board member and a Contributing Editor at Railway Age. As of 2019, he had the distinction for 77 days of having ridden all of the rail transit in the U.S. and is catching up on new starts. His article on this subject in Railway Age ran on Feb. 6 of this year and can be found at <https://www.railwayage.com/?s=new+starts>.

FROM THE RUN BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Rail Users' Network Newsletter is published quarterly by the Rail Users' Network, a 501 (c) (3), nonprofit corporation.

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RUN members enjoy newsletters, international conferences, regional rail forums, and other meetings to share information while working to improve and expand rail passenger service.

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