



# The Peach State XPress

News and Views from

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## "GEORGIA DOESN'T HAVE ITS ACT TOGETHER."

After months of anticipation, the Obama Administration has made its decision: 31 states will divide \$8 billion in high-speed passenger rail grants. Here in the Southeast, Florida will get \$1.2 billion to start building a high-speed line between Tampa and Orlando, and North Carolina and Virginia will share \$620 million to continue work on a future high-speed line between Charlotte and Washington, DC. And what about Georgia? After applying for \$472 million, Georgia will get just \$750 thousand, not for construction, but only for studies. According to the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, US Transportation Secy. Ray LaHood was blunt about why Georgia got so little: "Georgia doesn't have its act together," he said. "The state legislature doesn't want to put money in high-speed.rail." LaHood recalled an exchange he had with CfPT and GARP member Mason Hicks during a town hall meeting in Atlanta last fall. "Some fellow stood up and asked me how Georgia could get money for high-speed rail. I said, 'Get your act together.'" LaHood continued: "Unless a state has its act together, with money and a plan that connects things, you're not going to get money." Even though that warning was widely publicized last fall, Gov. Sonny Perdue, Georgia legislative leaders and the State Transportation Board all ignored it. The result was a forgone conclusion.

### HOW THEY GOT WHAT GEORGIA DIDN'T

**GET:** As the Peach State XPress noted last month, LaHood gave a similar "get your act together" warning to Florida, and Florida responded -- as LaHood might put it -- with "a plan that connects things." Meeting in a special session late last fall, the Florida legislature paved the way for Orlando commuter trains, it boosted funding for the existing Miami-area commuter rail system, and it established two state offices that will plan and oversee passenger rail projects. North Carolina and Virginia, on the other hand, didn't need any warnings; they've been "connecting things" for quite some time. Both states already fund intercity passenger trains, and both are working to upgrade the existing passenger train route linking Charlotte with Washington, DC. Late last year, a state-funded project double-tracked nine miles of that route, between Greensboro, NC and High Point. North Carolina Transportation Secy. Gene Conti told Trains magazine, "Over the last 15 years, using a little federal money here, and a little state money there, we've put together something we're proud of."

**CHARLOTTE'S WEB.** As a result of the grants announced last month, North Carolina and Virginia will continue making incremental improvements to the Charlotte-Washington line. North Carolina will use its money to increase top speeds between Charlotte and Raleigh to 90 mph, while Virginia will build a third track along a portion of the line between Richmond and Washington. The eventual goal is a 110-mph Southeast High-Speed Rail Corridor with trains running from Charlotte to Washington in about six hours. "Think about the economic advantage that corridor gives to Charlotte," Renay Blumenthal of the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce said in a newspaper interview. A similar concern was voiced by Matt Hicks, who works for the association that represents Georgia's county commissioners. "I'm afraid this is like Birmingham deciding not to expand its airport back in the 1950s," he said. Birmingham's failure to take action half a century ago helped make Atlanta the economic capital of the South. Now that the 21st Century is here, is Charlotte getting ready to overtake Atlanta? "If we remain stubbornly on this sidetrack," a Journal-Constitution editorial warned, "Georgia may find itself in a similar position to the stagecoach operators left behind on dusty roads a century ago."

## More Georgia News

**IS GEORGIA COMMITTED?** The Southeast High-Speed Corridor doesn't have to stop at Charlotte. The master plan calls for the line to continue on to Atlanta and Savannah, and beyond. Another \$2.5 billion is available for high-speed rail in this year's federal budget, and additional funding is expected in future years. Late last month, Georgia joined with Virginia, North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama and Florida in forming a new organization, the Southeast High-Speed Rail Commission. The group's stated purpose is "to accelerate high-speed and intercity rail connectivity," and a news release quoted Georgia Transportation Commissioner Vance Smith as saying, "We understand with great clarity that Georgia must commit to high-speed rail connectivity, and this is an opportune time to do so." Nice words, but it's hard to see where that commitment is. Georgia's newly issued Statewide Strategic Transportation Plan calls for a wide variety of road projects, but says agonizingly little about high-speed rail or rail transit. State Transportation Planner Todd Long told Atlanta's WABE radio, "It would take so much of our resources to fund commuter rail and high-speed rail connecting all these different cities that we essentially couldn't spend on anything else, so the current course just doesn't allow us to be very aggressive." Gov. Sonny Perdue recently asked the legislature for authority to borrow \$300 million for transportation projects, but the projects Perdue listed were almost exclusively road projects. Asked to explain, Perdue spokesman Ben Brantley told the Atlanta Business Chronicle that passenger rail projects are better suited to other revenue streams. He apparently didn't say exactly what those other revenue streams might be.

**REVENUE STREAM? OR DRY CREEK?** One possible way to fund intercity rail and transit is to allow counties to band together to form Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax districts, or SPLOSTs. Once again this year, the Georgia General Assembly is discussing that idea. Gov. Perdue, who opposed it last year, has endorsed a modified version this year. Under the Perdue plan, the state would be divided into 12 regions, and each region would vote in 2012 on whether to approve a one-cent sales tax for transportation. Minority Democrats like the SPLOST idea in general, but they say it needs to be passed as a constitutional amendment to prevent a legal challenge. And they say the initial vote should be held this year, not in 2012. Democrats also want a change in the way revenue from the gasoline sales tax is spent. While the state constitution earmarks all of the per-gallon motor fuel tax for bridges and roads, there is no constitutional restriction on how the four-cent gasoline sales tax is spent. Currently, three cents are spent on roads while one cent goes into the state's general fund. Democrats want all four cents dedicated to all forms of transportation, including transit. Despite broad bipartisan agreement that Georgia desperately needs additional funding for transportation, the chances of any plan getting through the legislature are iffy. Atlanta Journal-Constitution "Political Insider" columnist Jim Galloway writes that concern about the "Tea Party" movement has many Georgia legislators afraid of voting for any bill that even hints at a possible tax increase.

## Atlanta and Savannah

**MARTA CAN'T WAIT.** While Georgia politicians debate the long-range future of transportation, Georgia's biggest transit agency faces a huge funding crisis this year. The Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority gets most of its revenue from a two-county, one-city sales tax, and the economic downturn has cut that revenue sharply. MARTA managed to retain most of its service last year with a one-time infusion of \$25 million in federal economic stimulus money, but this year, it's up against the wall. MARTA needs at least an extra \$100 million to continue operations at their current level. And as Journal-Constitution columnist Jay Bookman writes, "Unless a miracle occurs by June 30, MARTA will be forced to make severe, even crippling cuts in services that tens of thousands of Georgians rely on heavily in their daily lives." Right now, MARTA isn't asking for any new money; it's simply asking the legislature to abolish an antiquated rule that earmarks half of MARTA's tax revenue for capital projects, rather than operations. Abolishing that rule won't solve MARTA's long-term financial problems, but it could hold off draconian service cuts while Georgia works out a more permanent plan. Transit advocates will join the Georgia Transit Association at the state Capitol in Atlanta on Feb. 18 for Transit Lobby Day. The morning will start with a \$25-per-person transit breakfast at the old Georgia Railroad Freight Depot (make reservations at [www.thegta.org](http://www.thegta.org)), followed by a transit bus caravan to the state capitol, where advocates will talk to their senators and representatives.

**STREETCAR OR LIGHT RAIL?** Ever since MARTA selected rail as the preferred transit mode for the Atlanta Beltline project, there's been an unresolved question: will it be light-rail trains or modern streetcars running on the Beltline? We may learn the answer this spring. Light-rail trains and streetcars involve similar technology. Both are usually powered by electricity, usually drawn from an overhead wire. Streetcars are generally smaller, close to the size of a MARTA bus, and light-rail trains are more likely to consist of more than one car. Atlantans got a brief look at a light-rail train last month, when a new Charlotte Lynx train was put on display in Centennial Olympic Park before heading on to North Carolina. Atlanta Beltline, Inc. is scheduled to weigh in on the streetcar or light-rail question when it releases an environmental impact study this spring. The same report will make recommendations on rail and trail alignments for the Beltline. The entire Beltline -- a park and transit loop circling downtown Atlanta -- isn't scheduled to be complete for another 25 years, but planners say portions of it will open much earlier.

**THE SAVANNAH SHUTTLE.** In October, 2008, when AirTran discontinued its Atlanta-Savannah route, the Peach State XPress argued the case for Atlanta-Savannah passenger train service. That case is stronger than ever before. AirTran's retreat left Delta as the only carrier between Atlanta and Savannah, and with no competition, fares have increased sharply. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution reports that Delta's round-trip fares now range from about \$250 to more than \$500, and Savannah business leaders complain that as a practical matter, it's virtually impossible to buy a ticket for less than \$500. Whether high-speed or conventional-speed, a state-funded train between Atlanta and Savannah would provide travelers with a more affordable alternative, offer needed competition that would drive down air fares, and also do something the airlines can't: bring service to intermediate cities along the route

## Here's Amtrak

**THE FUTURE OF AMTRAK.** Amtrak has announced it will seek nearly \$2.2 billion in federal funding for fiscal 2011, including a \$592 million operating subsidy. That's in line with Amtrak's multi-year Congressional authorization, but it's higher than Amtrak's current funding level, and higher than President Obama's recommendation. Amtrak also has issued a report on its long-term equipment needs, declaring it will need \$11 billion over the next 14 years to replace aging locomotives and passenger cars and expand capacity. To the dismay of many passenger rail advocates, the report does not anticipate any significant extension of the national long-distance train system. But it does say some of its existing long-distance trains will need to be lengthened to accommodate increasing demand. Looking at routes serving Georgia, Amtrak says it will need to expand the capacity of the New York-Savannah-Miami Silver Meteor, adding one more sleeper and one more coach to every run. It also thinks the Silver Star, running on that same New York-Savannah-Miami route, will need one more coach, as will the Crescent, which runs between New York, Atlanta and New Orleans. Amtrak says it's still looking into funding options.

**THE BATTLE OF NEW ORLEANS.** The National Association of Railroad Passengers has created a Gulf Coast Home Page to push for reinstating Amtrak service between Jacksonville and New Orleans. Amtrak's Sunset Limited used to stop at Jacksonville, Tallahassee and other cities near the Florida-Georgia border. But service was suspended when Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in 2005, and that service was never restored. NARP hopes the new web page, [www.narprail.org/cms/index.php/gulfcoast69](http://www.narprail.org/cms/index.php/gulfcoast69), will help press the case for reinstating the route, but there appears to be a new complication. The CSX Railroad, which owns the Gulf Coast line, has started running its faster freight trains on an alternate route. That suggests that if passenger service resumes on the Gulf Coast line, Amtrak will have to spend more money to keep it up to passenger train standards.

**AMTRAK BY THE NUMBERS.** Newly released figures show that despite the recession, Amtrak trains serving Georgia generally held their own during fiscal 2009. The two trains serving Amtrak's New York-Savannah-Miami route actually posted ridership gains: the Silver Star carried 371,235 passengers, up 1.1% from 2008; and the Silver Meteor carried 330,734 passengers, up 3.4% from 2008. The two other trains serving Georgia posted slight declines. The New York-Atlanta-New Orleans Crescent carried 286,576 passengers in fiscal 2009, down 1.6% from fiscal 2008; and the New York-Savannah Palmetto carried 171,316 passengers, down 1.5%. Nationally, Amtrak ridership was down 5.4% in fiscal 2009. But Amtrak's fiscal year ended September 30, and there are already signs that Amtrak ridership is on the rebound. During the first quarter of fiscal 2010 (October 2009 through December 2009) a record-breaking 7.2 million passengers rode Amtrak trains nationwide. Here in the Southeast, the Silver Star, the Silver Meteor and the Palmetto all enjoyed ridership increases compared with the first quarter of fiscal 2009, although the Crescent continued to lag.

**AMTRAK TIMEKEEPING IMPROVES:** The weak economy has had a bright side for Amtrak passengers: it's decreased freight congestion on the nation's railroads. That's at least one of the reasons why three of the four Amtrak trains serving Georgia had better on-time records during fiscal 2009. The Silver Star and the Silver Meteor both posted on-time percentages of 86.7%, 15.5 percentage points better than 2008 for the Star and 2.7 points better for the Meteor. The Crescent completed 78.3% of its trips on schedule, an improvement of 6.7 percentage points. The only Georgia Amtrak train to slip in on-time performance was the train that had the worst timekeeping problems to begin with: the Palmetto finished its runs on time just 66.7% of the time, down 2.8 percentage points from 2008.

## Scanning the World and The U.S.

**THE INTERNATIONAL.** Germany's Deutsche Bahn has selected Siemens as the "preferred bidder" for a mammoth 300-train order... Canada's GO Transit, which already operates summer and weekend service from Toronto to Niagara Falls, is conducting a study of regular weekday commuter train service... In India, residents of a New Delhi suburb, Guragon, pooled their money to build a train station.

**NATIONAL LIMITED.** President Obama has nominated Jeffrey Moreland, a former Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway vice-president, for a seat on Amtrak's Board of Directors.... New Obama Administration guidelines are expected to make it easier for rail transit projects to get funded... Railway Age reports that US and Canadian train operators ordered 1,141 new passenger train and transit cars in 2009, an eight-year high... The Federal Railroad Administration has issued new guidelines requiring stronger frames for passenger cars and some locomotives.... The National Transportation Safety Board says audio and video recorders should be installed in locomotive cabs to monitor engineers: it says a Metrolink engineer was sending text messages just 22 seconds before a 2008 wreck near Los Angeles that killed 25 people... The general manager of Washington DC's Metro system will resign, after heavy criticism of safety lapses that led to last year's deadly Metrorail crash... A well-known prison rights advocate was pulled off Amtrak's Southwest Chief in Colorado after passengers allegedly heard him talking about al-Qaeda; after conducting an investigation, prosecutors have concluded the man was no threat... Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn promises state funding for two passenger rail routes that would link Chicago with Dubuque and the Quad Cities, both in Iowa... Patronage on Amtrak's newest train in the Pacific Northwest, a second daily Seattle-Vancouver BC round trip, is running above expectations...

A tentative deal will allow Seattle light-rail trains to take over bus and carpool lanes on the I-90 bridge across Lake Washington... Virginia Railway Express ridership set two consecutive records on Jan. 5 and Jan. 6, with 18,315 passengers and 18,629 passengers respectively... Connecticut's Shore Line East commuter line will add four more daily round trips between New Haven and New London on Feb. 16... New Mexico's Rail Runner Express will raise fares and reduce Saturday service to deal with a budget shortfall.. The privately-owned Las Vegas Monorail line has filed for bankruptcy protection, but it will continue operating... Front Range Express commuter bus service between Denver and Colorado Springs will be discontinued Feb. 15... Ohio's Lorain County Transit, which operates commuter buses in the Cleveland area, has eliminated all but two of its routes... Three bus companies have inaugurated service from Washington, DC Union Station to New York, competing with Amtrak's Northeast Corridor trains... Pittsburgh transit buses have new, more sophisticated fareboxes that are better at rejecting counterfeit money.

**DIXIE FLYER.** The president of Virginia's Hampton Roads Transit has stepped down, amid criticism over cost overruns and delays building Norfolk's Tide light-rail line... Amtrak has added a new stop on its six-month-old Lynchburg, VA to Washington, DC, route, in Burks, VA; The Lynchburg Regional Convention and Tourism Board is using the new route as the focal point for a campaign to draw visitors... Hit by the recession, transit officials in Birmingham have asked the city council for \$9 million in emergency funding.

**GEORGIAN.** Citizens for Progressive Transit President Lee Biola has joined the board of Georgians for Passenger Rail, a successor to the Brain Train group; GPR is currently conducting a study of the potential economic benefits of Atlanta-Macon train service... The Georgia Department of Transportation is looking for private-sector companies interested in building the intermodal terminal planned for downtown Atlanta; the private partners would get the development rights above or adjacent to the terminal...

MARTA had to shut down most of the escalators at its rail stations, after learning that a contractor bypassed the safety system on at least one of them; it may take until the end of this month to inspect and reopen all the escalators... About 150 people, including members of GARP, CfPT and the Sierra Club RAIL Committee, attended last month's Sustainable Transportation Forum in Atlanta, sponsored by the Swiss government and Georgia Tech... The Atlanta Journal-Constitution ran guest columns last month by Atlanta Regional Commission Director Chick Krautler and MARTA Chairman Michael Tyler, both warning of dire consequences if Georgia continues to neglect mass transportation.

### **THE FEBRUARY CALENDAR**

- Saturday, Feb. 13, GARP monthly meeting, 10 AM, Town Square Condominiums Club Room, 225 East Ponce de Leon Ave., Decatur
- Thursday, Feb. 18, Georgia Transit Association Legislative Breakfast, 8:30 AM, Old Georgia Freight Depot, downtown Atlanta (reservations required)
- Thursday, Feb. 18, Transit Lobby Day, Georgia State Capitol, 9:30 AM.
- Saturday, Feb. 20, Sierra Club MARTA Pub Crawl, 8:30 PM, Georgia Sierra Club office, 743-B College Ave., Decatur
- Monday, Feb. 22, Sierra Club RAIL Committee meets, 6:45 PM, Georgia Sierra Club office, 743-B College Ave., Decatur
- Wednesday, Feb. 24, Citizens for Progressive Transit Board meeting, 7 PM, location TBA