



# The Peach State XPress

News and Views from

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of Railroad Passengers**

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## NO STREETCAR FOR ATLANTA

Just weeks after Georgia got shut out of federal stimulus funding for high-speed passenger trains, Atlanta's streetcar dreams have met a similar fate. Atlanta's application for \$298 million to build two streetcar lines failed to make the final cut last month, when the Obama Administration awarded \$1.5 billion in transportation stimulus grants. Once again the main problem seems to be Georgia's continuing refusal to put any serious state money into public transportation. With state funding non-existent, Atlanta wanted the feds to pay the entire construction cost of the streetcar project. That was in stark contrast to many of the winning applicants, who promised to match federal grants with their own money. Not surprisingly, the feds decided to help the states offering them the biggest bang for their bucks, leaving Georgia out in the cold. Atlanta city officials say they will seek other federal grants for the streetcar project, but unless the state changes its position against helping with public transportation, success seems unlikely.

### ANOTHER STEP IN THE WRONG DIRECTION.

It looks like bus riders in south suburban Atlanta will be the next victims of Georgia's reluctance to fund transit. Clayton County's C-Tran buses will stop running later this month, forcing about 2 million riders a year to seek alternate transportation. The federal government paid about 80% of the costs when C-Tran service began in 2001, but that "start-up" funding ran out. Declaring that money is tight and transit isn't a priority, the Clayton County Commission voted to end service as of March 31. County officials tried to make a deal with the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority to keep three of the C-Tran lines running as GRTA Xpress routes, but GRTA backed out after learning that those routes would not be eligible for federal subsidies. GRTA already has some regional bus routes that pass through Clayton County, and a few former C-Tran riders may be able to use them.

**IS MARTA NEXT?** While Georgia's largest transit operator -- the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority -- doesn't face a complete C-Tran-style shutdown, it could be forced to cut service by as much as 30% when its new fiscal year begins on July 1. The recession has cut sharply into the sales tax revenues that provide most of MARTA's funding, and unless the state legislature steps in to help, MARTA will face a fiscal 2011 revenue shortfall now estimated at \$120 million. The MARTA Board is considering a number of options, none of them appealing. Eliminating all Sunday service and perhaps Saturday service is a possibility. Or service hours could be cut back, with bus and train service starting as late as 6 a.m. and ending as early as midnight. 66 of MARTA's 131 bus routes could disappear, with other routes facing major realignments. Train frequencies could be reduced, forcing riders to wait up to 12 minutes during rush hours, and up to 30 minutes during off-peak hours. CfPT President Lee Biola told the Atlanta Journal-Constitution that the proposed cutbacks are "the worst that we've seen since the MARTA system was created." Forbes magazine recently reported that of the 60 biggest US metropolitan areas, Atlanta has the third-worst commute. If MARTA cutbacks put more drivers on the roads, Atlanta-area traffic will get even worse.

## More Georgia News

**TOO LITTLE TOO LATE?** After ignoring the threat of an Atlanta transit meltdown for more than a year, Gov. Sonny Perdue has finally endorsed "funding flexibility," the idea of letting MARTA spend more of its current tax revenue on operations instead of capital projects. If the General Assembly goes along with that idea, it could ease the looming crisis, but unfortunately, it's only a partial solution. Much more needs to be done head off major service cuts. Gov. Perdue has offered his own version of a plan to form regional transportation tax districts, but the Perdue version would provide no immediate aid to MARTA, because it wouldn't kick in until after 2012. Perdue's plan is problematic even in the long run, because it includes an eight-year sunset clause. That would prevent using the tax as leverage to obtain federal transit grants, which require a commitment of at least 20 years.

**A PENNY FOR TRANSIT?** The General Assembly is considering one other proposal that could help Georgia transit, and explaining this one requires a little background: When you buy gasoline in Georgia, you're actually paying two taxes: You're paying a per-gallon motor fuel tax that the state constitution earmarks for bridges and roads. You're also paying a four-cent-per-gallon sales tax. Currently, three of those cents go for bridges and roads, but the fourth cent goes into the state's general fund. The legislature is currently talking about redirecting that fourth cent -- or possibly all four cents -- to a fund for "all transportation purposes," a designation that would include transit as well as roads. That could help.

**CONTACT YOUR LEGISLATOR.** The current session of the Georgia General Assembly is expected to end in mid-April, and if the past is any guide, most if not all of the key votes will come in the final days. Now is the time to contact your state senator and your state representative. While the details of specific legislation can be confusing, even a broad message of support for transit can be helpful: Georgia's transit network should be expanding, not contracting, and the state government should be doing all it can to help. That includes giving MARTA permission to use more of its money for operations, and it includes designating the gasoline sales tax for all transportation purposes. You can contact your legislator in person, by phone, by letter or by email. You can find contact information for your state senator and state representative at [www.legis.state.ga.us](http://www.legis.state.ga.us). If you don't know who your legislators are, you can find out at [www.votesmart.org](http://www.votesmart.org).

**GET READY FOR THE ELECTIONS.** Regardless of what happens during the current session of the state legislature, the continuing fight to bring a more balanced transportation system to Georgia depends on electing more leaders who support transportation alternatives. With primary elections set for July and the general election coming up in November, Citizens for Progressive Transit will sponsor a "Transportation Choice in 2010" training session on how to make an impact on the candidates and the media. It will run from 9:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. on Saturday, March 27 at Central Presbyterian Church, 201 Washington St. in Atlanta. The training is free and open to all transit advocates. To RSVP or for more information, contact Jennette Gayer at [jennette@environmentgeorgia.org](mailto:jennette@environmentgeorgia.org).

**NORTHERN EXPOSURE.** If you'd like to see more transit in Atlanta's northern suburbs, here's a chance to speak out. The Georgia Department of Transportation is studying plans to reduce congestion along the "top end" of I-285, the interstate highway that circles Atlanta, and its asking for public input. If you think transit, not more lanes, is the solution, you can register your opinion by visiting GDOT's "Revive 285" web site, at [www.revive285.com](http://www.revive285.com), or you can call the project hotline, 707-431-7445

## Here's Amtrak

### **TOUGH MONTH FOR GEORGIA'S AMTRAK**

**TRAINS.** The blizzard that hit the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast last month disrupted some Amtrak service to Georgia. The New York-Savannah Palmetto was canceled. The Silver Star and the Silver Meteor were canceled between New York and Savannah, but they continued to run between Savannah and Miami. The New York-Atlanta-New Orleans Crescent continued to run despite the storm, but the Crescent faced some other problems during February. The southbound Crescent was delayed six hours on Feb. 10, after it hit a dump truck at a grade crossing in Nokesville, VA. Three days later, passengers had to be bused between Atlanta and Greenville, SC, after a Norfolk Southern freight derailment on Atlanta's north side blocked the tracks.

### **AMTRAK RIDERSHIP: GEORGIA DOWN, SA-**

**VANNAH UP.** Despite the recession, Amtrak's Georgia ridership declined just 1.8% last year. 169,596 passengers got on or off Amtrak trains at Georgia stations during fiscal 2009, down just a little from 2008's total of 172,855. One station -- Savannah -- actually reported an increase: Savannah played host to 56,171 passengers in 2009, up almost 3.7% from fiscal 2008. Elsewhere across the state, Atlanta train patronage was 96,453 last year, down 4.5% from 2008; Jesup served 8,712 passengers, down 0.8%; Gainesville ridership was 5,096, down 8.7% from 2008; and Toccoa had 3,204 riders, down 2.2%. Amtrak spent \$22,297,716 for goods and services in Georgia last year, and it spent \$3,677,058 to pay its 57 Georgia-based employees.

## Scanning the World and The U.S.

**THE INTERNATIONAL.** A Feb. 15 commuter train collision in Brussels, Belgium killed at least 18 people... Turkey plans to spend \$12 billion over the next 10 years on high-speed rail... Transit fares in Ottawa, Canada have gone up for the third straight year.

**NATIONAL LIMITED.** Describing the Obama Administration's recent high-speed rail grants as a down payment, a report by the US Public Interest Resource Group recommends a further increase in government investment in passenger trains... A study by a regional planning group says high-speed rail in California could divert six million passengers from San Francisco-area airports... Talgo America -- which has a contract to build at least two passenger train sets for the State of Wisconsin -- will set up a plant in Milwaukee; the same plant will also build two trains for Oregon... Investor Carl Icahn is getting into the passenger rail business, too; he's formed a partnership with Ohio's US Railcar to build self-propelled diesel multiple unit trains... Southern California's Metrolink has taken delivery of two new commuter rail cars, the first of 117 cars that feature "crush zones" that safely absorb impact in a crash... Embarrassed by reports about a bus driver who worked a lot of overtime, the Mayor of Madison, WI is asking the local transit agency and its union to work together to make sure no individual driver earns more than \$100,000 a year.. The economic downturn is forcing more transit agencies to cut costs: Southern California's Metrolink and Chicago's CTA reduced service last month; New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority and New Jersey Transit and northern Indiana's South Shore Line announced layoffs, and the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency announced fare increases.. Arizona's Metro light-rail line will step up spot-checks to reduce fare evasion... Tuscon, AZ will use federal stimulus money to build a 3.9-mile street car line... Massachusetts will use stimulus money to extend its Boston-Fitchburg commuter rail line 4.5 miles, to a new station west of Fitchburg... the Delaware River Port Authority is starting design work for a new light-rail line along the Philadelphia wa-

terfront.... New York's Port Authority has approved a contract for a new PATH train station at the World Trade Center, to replace the temporary facility built after the 9/11 attack in 2001.... Amtrak is now offering free wireless internet access on its Acela Express trains between Washington, DC and Boston... Minot, North Dakota will use federal stimulus funds to renovate its Amtrak depot, a stop for the Chicago-Seattle Empire Builder... University of Montana students and the Montana Public Interest Resource Group have set up an online petition to advocate a second Amtrak route between Chicago and the Pacific Northwest; it's at [www.montpirgstudents.org](http://www.montpirgstudents.org).

**DIXIE FLYER.** New Orleans will use federal stimulus funds to build a new streetcar line: the 1.5-mile streetcar line will link the existing Canal Street line with the Louisiana Superdome and Union Passenger Terminal, which serves Amtrak and intercity buses... The new Amtrak train between Lynchburg, VA and Washington, DC required no state operating subsidy in November; ridership was double the predicted level, and the train recorded a profit... Virginia officials are now thinking about launching an Amtrak train between Richmond and Norfolk... Richmond area transit officials are studying the possibility of a seven-and-a-half mile bus rapid transit line between Richmond and Henrico County... The Birmingham City Council has agreed to give the cash-strapped Birmingham-Jefferson County Transit Authority \$3 million to continue bus service for the next three months.

**THE GEORGIAN.** State Rep. Jay Shaw (D-Lakeland) has been elected to the First District seat on the State Transportation Board... Following complaints from Asian-American groups, MARTA has agreed to change the name of its Doraville-Airport rail route from the "yellow" line" to the "gold" line; to save money, the change will be phased in gradually.... MARTA is rolling out the first of 101 new compressed natural gas buses, replacements for older buses being retired... Efforts to repair and reopen MARTA rail station escalators closed amid safety concerns in January are moving more slowly than expected, and repairs may not be complete until May... Perkins+Will and James Corner Field Operations have been hired to help design the Beltline corridor, the 22-mile park and transit loop planned for central Atlanta... Cobb County Transit plans to eliminate middle-of-the-day weekday bus service on Route 65, which links the Marietta Transfer Center with the Dunwoody MARTA station; and on Route 70, which runs from County Services Parkway to the Cumberland Transfer Center; public hearings will be held this month... GRTA has opened a new park-and-ride lot at the intersection of Tara Boulevard and Fayetteville Road in Jonesboro, serving its 440 and 441 Xpress bus routes; it plans to open a second Xpress station in Douglas County next month... Savannah's

Chatham Area Transit changed schedules on five of its routes March 1... Special CAT shuttle buses will run from the Westside Shopping Center, Island Towne Center and the Savannah Mall on March 17, carrying people to and from Savannah's St. Patrick's Day parade... CAT is replacing orange oval bus stop signs that date back to 1946 with a new, standardized design; so many Savannah residents have expressed interest in owning the old signs; they'll be given away in a lottery.

**THE TRAIN STOPS HERE.** This is the last issue of the Peach State XPress going out to GARP members who have not yet renewed their memberships for 2010; to keep getting your monthly update on Georgia trains and transit coming, send your dues (\$50 contributing/\$20 regular/\$10 students and seniors/\$30 families) to GARP at PO Box 851, Decatur, GA 30031. or visit [www.garprail.org](http://www.garprail.org) to renew via Paypal. Act now to avoid missing a single issue of the Peach State XPress!

### THE MARCH TIMETABLE

- Monday, March 8, MARTA service decisions forum, 6 p.m., Senior Connections, 5238 Peachtree Rd., Chamblee
- Tuesday, March 9, MARTA service decisions forum, 6 p.m., North Fulton Service Center, 7741 Roswell Rd., Sandy Springs
- Saturday, March 13, GARP monthly meeting, 10 a.m., Town Square Condominiums Club Room, 225 East Ponce de Leon Ave., Decatur
- Wednesday, March 17, Cobb County Transit public meeting on Route 70 service cuts, 4 p.m., Cobb County Purchasing Dept., 1772 County Services Pkwy., Marietta
- Thursday, March 18, Cobb County Transit public meeting on Route 65 service cuts, 4 p.m., Cobb County Central Library Conference Room, 266 Roswell St., Marietta
- Thursday, March 18, Beltline Volunteer Night, 5:30 p.m., Park Tavern, 500 10th St., Atlanta
- Saturday, March 20, Cobb County Transit public meeting on Route 65 service cuts, 10 a.m., East Cobb Government Center Main Conference Room, 4400 Lower Roswell Rd., Marietta
- Monday, March 22, Sierra Club RAIL Committee meeting, 6:45 p.m., Georgia Sierra Club office, 743-B College Ave., Decatur
- Wednesday, March 24, Citizens for Progressive Transit Board meeting, 7 p.m., Suite 204 at The Biltmore, 817 West Peachtree St., Atlanta (please arrive before 7, because elevators are restricted after that)
- Saturday, March 27, Transportation Choice in 2010 election training, 9:30 a.m., Central Presbyterian Church, 201 Washington St., Atlanta
- Saturday, March 27, Cobb County Transit public meeting on Route 70 service cuts, 10 a.m., South Cobb Government Center, 4700 Austell Rd., Austell