



The Peach State XPress

News and Views from

**The Georgia Association
of Railroad Passengers**

**Citizens for
Progressive Transit**

P.O. Box 851, Decatur, Georgia, 30031
newsletter@garprail.org www.garprail.org

P.O. Box 56306, Atlanta, Georgia, 30343
info@cfpt.org www.cfpt.org



Jim Dexter, Editor editor@garprail.org

Copyright © 2010 Georgia Association of Railroad Passengers, Inc.

May 2010

GENERAL ASSEMBLY PASSES TRANSPORT BILL: IMPACT UNCERTAIN

After three years of uncertainty and debate and all sorts of twists and turns, it finally happened: the Georgia General Assembly finally passed a transportation funding bill, but it's still much too early to celebrate. HB 277 -- which the Georgia House and Senate both passed last month by deceptively large margins -- is a very complicated piece of legislation that may or may not boost transit funding. Assuming that Gov. Sonny Perdue signs it, HB 277 will divide the state into 12 regional transportation tax districts. State officials and local "roundtable" representatives in each district will propose transportation projects, then in July 2012, voters in each district will decide whether to fund the proposals with a 1% sales tax. How this will work in practice remains to be seen. Some roundtables may not be able to agree on a project list, and even in regions where the roundtables agree, getting voters to approve a 1% sales tax may be challenging. Some critics even argue that HB 277 is unconstitutional. A court challenge is likely.

IS IT REALLY TRANSIT-FRIENDLY?

Even though the regional roundtables will have the right to consider transit projects as well as road projects, HB 277 does not appear to be especially transit friendly. A case in point: even though the federal government requires a 20-year commitment before it will offer matching funds for transit projects, HB 277 sets a ten-year limit on the sales tax. Another problem: HB 277 assigns Macon, Atlanta, Griffin and Athens to separate tax districts, which at the very least will complicate efforts to fund a Macon-Griffin-Atlanta-Athens commuter line. After looking over the particulars, the Athens Banner-Herald concluded that HB 277 "will do little to bring passenger rail to Athens."

HB 277 AND MARTA

HB 277's impact on Atlanta transit is a little more nuanced. It lets the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority spend more of its current revenue on operations and maintenance, but provides no new funding. This means MARTA still faces the prospect of significant service cutbacks starting this summer, but in an ironic twist, HB 277 also opens the door to a possible expansion of MARTA into Clayton County. Clayton lost C-Tran bus service last month. HB 277 gives Clayton County Commissioners the ability -- but not the obligation -- to hold a MARTA referendum later this year. Adding Clayton County would certainly expand MARTA's tax base, but since the taxes raised in Clayton would have to be spent in Clayton, the new money would not alleviate the transit agency's financial problems. Ironically, MARTA may find itself studying new transit for Clayton even as it studies service cuts in Fulton and DeKalb counties.

More Georgia News

GOING BEYOND MARTA?

While HB 277 could lead to expanding the MARTA service area, it could also lead to the replacement of MARTA, or possibly to the creation of a new regional transit agency with authority over MARTA. The bill establishes a commission made up of legislators, local government officials and transit operators that will consider possibilities for combining MARTA with other transit agencies such as the Cobb, Gwinnett and GRTA XPress bus systems. The commission would deliver a report by August, 2011, but you can't blame transit advocates for taking some of this with a grain of salt. In recent years, we've seen a bewildering parade of commissions, panels and committees wrestle with the issue of regional transit. Some good plans have emerged. But so far no one has resolved the issue of funding. Until there's a firm financial commitment, glorious plans are just glorious plans.

BUILDING THE CASE FOR BUILDING TRANSIT

Are Atlanta-area residents willing to pay higher taxes to fund more transit? The Civic League for Regional Atlanta has released a report that may offer some clues. Prepared by Georgia State University's Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, the report looks at successful battles to start light-rail lines in Dallas, Houston, St. Louis and Salt Lake City, areas with "population densities, political climates, and governmental structures similar to those of the Atlanta region." The authors note that transit supporters in all four cities originally faced loud and sometimes outlandish resistance, including a group that picketed Utah Transit Authority offices carrying signs declaring, "Light rail kills babies." The transit campaigns faced many setbacks along the way including lawsuits and failed referenda, but eventually persistence paid off, and today all four cities have popular light-rail systems. The Civic League report concludes that light-rail is "not a liberal-conservative issue," and that it "can be adopted even in predominantly conservative local political environments."

STATIONS UNDER SCRUTINY

A new study recommends improving MARTA's Bankhead train station and replacing Atlanta's Amtrak station. TRIP, a Washington, DC transportation research group funded by companies involved in highway and transit construction, notes that the platform at MARTA's Bankhead station can only accommodate two-car trains. It says that extending the platform would allow MARTA to run eight-car trains on its Bankhead-Edgewood/Candler Park Green line, increasing passenger capacity. As for the Atlanta Amtrak station, the report declares that the 102-year-old facility is outdated and out of compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. TRIP notes that Norfolk Southern freight trains must wait for Amtrak trains to load and unload at the station before passing through, and it says the resulting bottleneck causes delays along the entire Norfolk Southern mainline. TRIP says a new station that freight trains can easily bypass "would improve freight and passenger rail flow through Atlanta and along the entire corridor." Atlanta railroad historians would note that the current Amtrak stop was never designed to be Atlanta's main train station, and that it took over that role only after Atlanta's bigger downtown stations were closed in the 1960s. Despite long-running discussions of moving Amtrak service to new stations proposed for downtown Atlanta or the Lenox Square area, funding has been elusive.

Here's Amtrak and more

BOUNCING BACK FROM RECESSION

After a 5.4% decline during fiscal 2009, Amtrak ridership bounced back during the first half of fiscal 2010. Patronage rose 4.3% during the six-month period that ended in March, and all four Amtrak trains serving Georgia shared in the trend. The Palmetto, which links Savannah with Washington and New York, showed the biggest gain, a 9.3% increase over the first six months of fiscal 2009. The Silver Star and the Silver Meteor, running between Miami, Savannah, Washington and New York, saw increases of 8.3% and 6.5% respectively. The Crescent, on the New Orleans-Atlanta-Washington-New York route, posted a 1.1% gain. If current trends continue through the end of September, fiscal 2010 will be a record-breaking year for Amtrak.

THE INTERNATIONAL

China's 314-mile high-speed rail line between Zhengzhou and Xian has been so popular, air service between the two cities has been discontinued... VIA Rail Canada has cut as much as 20 minutes from its passenger train schedules between Quebec City and Montreal... Observers say Europe's extensive passenger train network kept the continent mobile when the recent Iceland volcano eruption shut down air service.

NATIONAL LIMITED

A new national survey shows 49% of adult Americans support building high-speed rail corridors, while only 26% oppose the idea... High-speed rail negotiations between New York State and the CSX railroad reportedly stalled, after state officials demanded an immediate upgrade for 110-mph service between Albany and Buffalo... An Ohio board has approved plans to complete engineering and design work for a passenger rail corridor between Cleveland, Columbus and Cincinnati, but Republicans on the board all voted "no," raising questions about the future of the project... Oklahoma and Texas will conduct a one-year test of biodiesel fuel on Amtrak's Heartland Flyer, running between Oklahoma City and Ft. Worth... After a long hiatus blamed on a shortage of baggage cars, Amtrak's New York-Chicago Cardinal will again offer checked baggage service... Caltrain hopes to electrify its San Francisco-San Jose commuter rail line by 2019... Los Angeles County transportation officials say they'll support an ambitious plan to speed up transit construction by borrowing \$8 billion from the federal government... Texas may seek a private partner to build and operate a proposed commuter rail line between Ft. Worth and Wylie, TX... Workers have started building a 15-mile bus rapid transit line between Henderson, NV and Las Vegas... A new BRT line in West Valley City, UT connects with Salt Lake City's TRAX light-rail line... A University of Minnesota study concludes that the opening of the Hiawatha light-rail line in Minneapolis has significantly improved job access for low-income workers... In order to prevent transit cuts, Saint Louis County, MO voters have agreed to a half-cent sales tax increase... Southern California's Metrolink plans to raise commuter rail fares 6% on July 1... New Jersey Transit raised fares by up to 25% on May 1... New York City's Metropolitan Transit Authority plans to lay off 500 bus workers and 100 subway workers in July... The American Public Transportation Association says the recession has forced 59% of US mass transit systems to reduce service or raise fares since the beginning of last year... Robert J. "Bob" Stewart of Florida has been elected chairman of the National Association of Railroad Passengers, succeeding George Chilson of California... May 8 is National Train Day, marking the 141st anniversary of the first transcontinental railroad.

Closer to Home

DIXIE FLYER

Amtrak ran a test train May 1 on the Florida East Coast Railroad between Miami and Jacksonville; it's a shorter, faster line than Amtrak's current route between the two cities... Amtrak is teaming up with Virginia tourism officials to provide vacation packages in Charlottesville and Lynchburg, served by Amtrak's New Orleans-New York Crescent, and by a new state-funded train between Lynchburg and Washington, DC.

THE GEORGIAN

The Georgia General Assembly has appropriated \$1.5 million to help match federal funding for studies of a proposed Atlanta-Chattanooga, TN magnetic levitation or high-speed rail line... Fourth District Congressman Hank Johnson (D-Georgia) was one of more than 100 House members who signed a letter to President Obama, urging him to support a dedicated funding source for high-speed rail... MARTA adjusted schedules for 18 bus routes on April 20; the changes are not related to service cutbacks expected later this summer... MARTA is holding a contest for videos and blogs on the subject, "MARTA matters to the environment;" for information on how to enter, visit www.itsmarta.com... A second trail segment has opened along the Atlanta Beltline, the park and transit loop planned for central Atlanta... The US Census Bureau reports that it takes the average Atlantan about 30 minutes to commute to work... The Atlanta Regional Commission has started planning for the year 2040, and it's holding an "online public meeting" through the rest of this month; you can get information at the ARC website, www.atlantaregional.com... Lee Biola has been re-elected CfPT president; Amir Farokhi was voted in as vice-president, Ashley Robbins was named secretary, and Bob Krone was elected to succeed long-time treasurer Shelby Mayes.

THE MAY TIMETABLE

- *Saturday, May 8* - GARP monthly meeting, 10 a.m., Town Square Condominiums Club Room, 225 East Ponce de Leon Ave. Decatur
- *Wednesday, May 19* - Congress for New Urbanism, Atlanta Hilton, 255 Courtland St. NE, Atlanta, GA 3003
- *Monday, May 24* - Sierra Club RAIL Committee meeting, 6:45 p.m., Georgia Sierra Club office, 743-B College Ave., Decatur
- *Wednesday, May 26* - CfPT Board meeting, 7 p.m., Suite 204, Atlanta Biltmore, 817 West Peachtree St. NW, Atlanta