

**WRITTEN STATEMENT OF
HONORABLE KNOX ROSS
SECRETARY-TREASURER OF THE SOUTHERN RAIL COMMISSION AND
MAYOR OF PELAHATCHIE, MISSISSIPPI**

**BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE AND TRANSPORTATION,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON SURFACE TRANSPORTATION AND MERCHANT MARINE
INFRASTRUCTURE, SAFETY AND SECURITY SUBCOMMITTEE**

**“PASSENGER RAIL:
OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR THE NATIONAL NETWORK”**

February 23, 2015

Chairman Fischer, Ranking Member Booker, Senator Wicker and members of the Surface Transportation and Merchant Marine Infrastructure, Safety and Security Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss issues important to the nation’s passenger rail system.

The people of the South also owe this committee a huge thank you for your efforts to include a great passenger rail title in the FAST Act for the first time in our history!

I am Knox Ross, the mayor of the City of Pelahatchie, MS. More important, I’m here today as an appointed commissioner to the Southern Rail Commission – a tri-state interstate rail compact established by the U.S. Congress in 1982 for the states of Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana.

I didn’t get appointed by the Mississippi Governor to the Southern Rail Commission so I could get a station for my town; I don’t have service today and I’m not going to get a station. We are 20 miles to the east of Jackson Union Station and I wholeheartedly support my colleague Mayor Tony Yarber in his efforts to redevelop that station and its surrounding area.

I am a commissioner because I understand that the success of our town is directly tied to the prosperity of the region. And for my region to prosper, we must have a transportation system that provides options for residents to connect to opportunity in our region and beyond. Sadly, because of the loss of essential air service for some and the imminent threat of loss of service for others, our options are getting increasingly limited. But that doesn’t have to be. Passenger rail service is an option that help us grow our economy by attracting and retaining talent, bringing new tourists in to visit, and connecting our residents to jobs and opportunity.

What I just highlighted is not all too different than the conditions facing my colleagues in Colorado, Michigan, Missouri, Wisconsin, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, Minnesota, West Virginia, and many other states.

When you created the Southern Rail Commission 30 years ago, you charged us to be your eyes and ears for the needs of the South. Well, I'm here to report back that the needs are real in the South and we are ready for your help.

Last week, thanks to the leadership of Senators Wicker, Cochran, Nelson, and Representative Corrine Brown, we kicked off the Gulf the Coast Passenger Rail Working Group to develop the best, most efficient, most fiscally responsible solution for restoring passenger rail service to the Gulf Coast – service that was lost more than a decade ago because of Hurricane Katrina. I want to let you know that, with the leadership from FRA Administrator Feinberg and her team, and cooperation of members from the states of Florida, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana, and CSX, we are going to deliver a report in September that I am confident you will be proud of.

Last week, with the support of our good friend President Boardman and his amazing team at Amtrak and CSX, we hosted an inspection train along the Gulf Coast from New Orleans to Jacksonville. I wish you all could have been on the train with us to see the genuine, patriotic excitement for passenger rail service on this route in communities all along the coast — some of which were devastated by Hurricane Katrina and still fighting hard to bounce back. Each stop had hundreds, if not thousands of people cheering and asking when they will get to board the train. Unfortunately, we still have work to do to secure the funding through appropriations, but the experience witnessed by our commission, the mayors, and the governors of these states showed us that failure is not an option.

The region is set to grow by 10 million people over the coming years and we need options to connect our people to opportunity, increase economic prosperity and support our thriving and culturally rich communities. And we need ways to bring more tourists to our beautiful coast and spend their money.

We also need to think bigger than just restoring service to the Gulf.

We are also committed to starting service connecting Baton Rouge to New Orleans, providing access to the New Orleans airport, and connecting the two largest cities in the Pelican State with another travel option to the congested I-10 corridor.

Another corridor that needs a similar option is Interstate 20. We are also dedicated to connecting the mega regions of Atlanta and Dallas-Ft Worth through Meridian, Jackson, and Vicksburg, Mississippi, and Northern Louisiana. I would like to submit for the record a letter of support sent by 20 mayors and civic leaders in that corridor to the governors of Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas asking for their commitment to this project as well.

The Southern Rail Commission is doing your bidding as asked. And now I'm here to ask for your help so we can make this vision a reality.

First, and most important, we must never lose sight of the importance of the national passenger railroad system. The passenger rail title arbitrarily separates the Northeast Corridor's appropriations from the rest of the country. The Northeast Corridor is indeed incredibly important, and our commission will work with anyone in the Northeast to improve this economic engine. However, prioritizing the Northeast over the rest of the country is not fair to our states that have subsidized the Northeast system, and sends the wrong signal to the thousands of southern citizens – young and old – that came out last week on a work day to support restoring passenger rail service in the Gulf.

Second, we must ensure that this fact is well understood by the Amtrak Board of Directors. Joe Boardman is set to retire this fall. Joe has been a great friend for the national passenger rail system, including in the South, and we're grateful to him for his dedication and support. It's vitally important that the Amtrak Board of Directors find a qualified successor able to continue Joe's efforts. A criterion must include a deep understanding of and support for all three of Amtrak's lines of service – state-supported, long-distance, and the Northeast Corridor.

Third, Amtrak's Board of Directors should be diverse in geographic representation. The current Board's makeup is heavily weighted to favor the Northeast. I call upon you to provide the South due representation on the Board of Directors with the additional position made available by the FAST Act.

Fourth, our states, local governments, and businesses are ready to do their part and invest in our passenger rail system. However, we need your help to ensure the federal government is a partner in this effort. This means we need to support dedicated passenger rail funding for Amtrak, and fund the two discretionary grant programs created by this Committee in the FAST Act.

The Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements program is the most diverse and geographically accessible program we can fund. This program funds everything from positive train control to capital construction to planning and research, and it's available to all states. Congress has not made dedicated passenger rail capital funding available to our states since 2010. We are past due for Congress to partner with us to implement the state rail plans that are required by this legislative body.

The Restoration and Enhancement Grants program is a prudent investment as well. This program provides operating assistance for up to six new, reestablished or expanded passenger rail services.

No transportation system in America is self-sustaining. Let us look no farther than the highway and transit programs to highlight this fact. Prior to the FAST Act, the Highway Trust Fund needed nearly \$75 billion from 2008 to 2015 to stave off insolvency. The FAST Act transferred another \$70 billion from 2016 to 2020.

In 2008, Congress required all services under 750 miles to pay 100 percent of its cost. We don't require this for highways or transit, and I don't think we should require that for passenger rail either. The Restoration and Enhancement Grants program provides fiscally responsible operating assistance: up to 80 percent operating assistance in year one, 60 percent in year two, and 40 percent in year three. The service will have to pay 100 percent of its cost in year four, but this program provides new and reestablished service training wheels per se to help it build ridership and farebox receipts before its left to its own devices.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and answer your questions today. I need to once again thank my Senator, Senator Wicker. He is a true leader and partner for our commission, and we wouldn't be where we are today in terms of serious progress for our rail vision without his support. This thank you extends to his staff, and to the bipartisan work of the Commerce Committee staff.

We look forward to working with this Subcommittee to achieve our vision and support your efforts to provide a passenger rail system that improves our economies and provides the necessary options for us to compete for jobs and attract talent. I will be happy to respond to your questions.