



Founded 1979

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The Peach State XPress

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ARC RESCUES MARTA, FOR NOW

No thanks to the Georgia General Assembly, the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority will be able to maintain seven-day-a-week train and bus service for one more year. Two months after the Georgia legislature effectively told Atlanta-area transit riders to drop dead, the Atlanta Regional Commission Board of Directors has come to their rescue. The ARC Board voted to give MARTA \$25 million in federal economic stimulus funds, allowing it to avoid draconian service cuts that would have rippled through the entire state's economy. It's not a permanent solution to MARTA's funding problems; as a matter of fact, it's not even a complete solution for the short-term. The MARTA staff is still recommending a 25-cent fare increase effective later this year, along with service cuts that include ending rail service at midnight. But that's much less severe than what would have happened if ARC had not acted. Like most other transit agencies across the country, MARTA is feeling the impact of the recession, which has sharply reduced the sales tax revenue that provides most of its funding. Earlier this year, MARTA developed a common-sense plan to shift some of that tax revenue from capital projects to operations, a move that would have maintained adequate service levels without any funding increase. Unfortunately, the plan required legislative approval, and when the General Assembly adjourned shortly after April Fool's Day without granting it, Atlanta-area officials had to scramble. When the chips were down, it was local officials, not the legislature, that came through.

A TEMPORARY FIX. While ARC's decision to rescue MARTA is good news, it's only a temporary fix. The federal economic stimulus program is one-time emergency legislation. Sales tax revenues tend to recover very, very slowly after recessions, so MARTA's shortfall could rise to \$50 million next year. MARTA will have no choice but to go back to the General Assembly, and so far, the legislature has given no indication it's ready to act responsibly. Part of the problem is its MARTA Oversight Committee, which seems to be more interested in political grandstanding than in looking out for the interests of Atlanta-area transit riders. MARTOC Chairman Jill Chambers (R-North Fulton), continues to insist, despite all evidence to the contrary, that MARTA's financial problems are somehow of its own making. And another MARTOC member, State Sen. John Wiles (R-Kennesaw), recently declared, "I would not want MARTA to have to wash my car." MARTA General Manager Beverly Scott says she would welcome an audit. "We have absolutely nothing to hide," she said, "and we hope that a full and objective review by the state auditor will answer these questions once and for all."

CAN THE GRIFFIN LINE BE SAVED? Everyone agrees that the plan to start commuter train service along Norfolk Southern's Atlanta-Griffin line is in serious jeopardy, but US Sen. Johnny Isakson (R-Georgia) appears to be confused about the reason why. Isakson recently declared that the closure of the Hapeville Ford plant, located along the line, has reduced potential ridership, but that's not true. The Ford plant was never expected to generate passengers, and a mixed-use development planned for the site could potentially produce many commuters. And now that the plant is closed, there's less freight traffic on the line, reducing the cost of getting it ready for passenger service. The real obstacle to Atlanta-Griffin commuter rail service is and always has been the state's refusal to provide operating funds. The federal government promised \$87 million to help start the line about a decade ago, but nothing has ever happened because there's never been any state money. Now Congress is running out of patience, and a new multi-year transit funding plan expected this year is unlikely to include the Atlanta-Griffin line. Local elected officials up and down the line are trying to rescue the plan. They hope to complete a study on the proposed line's economic potential by August. But unless they can reach a last-minute agreement on how to fund operations, federal money for the Atlanta-Griffin line could disappear sometime in the next few months.

THE SLOW PATH TO HIGH-SPEED RAIL. Despite Georgia's long-running failure to provide adequate funding for MARTA or commuter rail, some state officials still have hopes of landing federal funding for high-speed rail. The Georgia Department of Transportation's Intermodal Division has started work on a state rail plan, and the division's director,

Eric Steavens, is scheduled to address a June meeting in Gainesville, along one of the proposed high-speed lines. The Chatham County Commission in Savannah, along another proposed high-speed line, endorsed the concept. And the Atlanta Journal-Constitution ran an editorial titled, "Georgia can't afford to miss this train." Unfortunately, the train may already be pulling out of the station. As last month's Peach State XPress pointed out, the states with the best chance of getting federal high-speed rail money are states that already fund conventional rail passenger service, and that have advanced high-speed development plans. The Federal Railroad Administration recently scheduled a series of workshops on high-speed rail, and the only workshop in the Southeast took place in Charlotte last month. That's no coincidence. North Carolina already funds two daily Amtrak round trips, it's getting ready to launch a third, and it has participated in detailed studies of proposed high-speed rail service between Charlotte and Washington, DC. A recent article in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution noted that Charlotte has hopes of "one day surpassing Atlanta as King of the South." The story was accompanied by a photo of Charlotte's popular new light-rail line, and it talked about Charlotte's plans for commuter rail. The AJC noted Atlanta's growing reputation for traffic congestion and the Georgia legislature's failure to provide funds for transit, and quoted Charlotte Mayor Pat McCrory as saying, "We've had the opportunity to learn from Atlanta's mistakes."

CHICAGO-ATLANTA-FLORIDA, AGAIN. The Atlanta Business Chronicle reports that the Georgia DOT is interested in reviving talks about possible Amtrak service between Chicago, Atlanta and Miami. For a period during the 1990's, officials from Georgia and other states along the Chicago-Miami route held a series of discussions, but the initiative fell victim to Amtrak's financial problems and the Bush Administration's opposition to long-distance trains. Now that Congress and the Obama Administration are putting more money into passenger rail, there may be a better chance for success. Amtrak operated a Chicago-Miami train, the Floridian, during the 1970's. But that train bypassed Atlanta, going through Birmingham instead. Many observers believe the failure to serve the Atlanta market contributed to the Floridian's demise in 1979.

CONGRESSMAN PRICE ON AMTRAK PASSENGERS: LET THEM STARVE. US Congressman Tom Price of Georgia (R-6th) doesn't think Amtrak passengers have a right to food service, and apparently, neither does Atlanta's WSB-TV. In a story on alleged government waste, reporter Justin Farmer declared that Amtrak loses \$250 million on food service. He apparently got the figure from Price, who appeared in the report declaring, "What Amtrak should do if it's losing a quarter of a billion dollars is price it's products more appropriately, or not sell 'em at all." Farmer apparently made no at-

tempt to balance his report with an opposing voice, and he apparently accepted Price's \$250 million figure without doing any independent research. If he had looked into the matter, he would have discovered that \$250 million was not a one-year figure, but a three-year-total. It's also an old total. It covers the years 2002-2004, before Amtrak dropped its food service contract with Gate Gourmet, and made a number of other economy moves. Price is an established passenger rail opponent: in the five most recent House votes on Amtrak-related legislation, he voted against Amtrak all five times. And he doesn't seem to understand that Amtrak doesn't sell food on trains to make money. It sells food so that passengers -- some of them on trips lasting two or three days -- can eat. Serving food on a moving train is inherently more expensive than serving food in a restaurant, and even before Amtrak, railroads lost money doing it. Then -- as now -- the food losses were a necessary expense of doing business. If you can't serve food on long-distance trains, people won't ride them.

THE AMTRAK HALF-TIME REPORT. Despite the recession and lower gas prices, most of the Amtrak trains serving Georgia saw increased ridership in the first six months of fiscal 2009, compared with the first half of fiscal 2008. The biggest winners were the New York-Savannah-Miami trains, the Silver Meteor (up 10.5%) and the Silver Star (up 8.8%). The New York-Atlanta-New Orleans Crescent recorded a more modest gain, up 0.9%. The only Georgia Amtrak train to lose ridership for the period was the New York-Savannah Palmetto, which saw a 2.9% decline. Nationally, Amtrak patronage dipped 3.4%, largely because of a recession-related decline in business travel in the Boston-Washington Northeast Corridor. Amtrak recently announced a summer-long fare sale on NEC trains to help rebuild patronage. But even though the recession has softened national Amtrak ridership, it's helped to produce a benefit for Amtrak passengers: more on-time trains. Rail freight business is down, reducing congestion on the tracks Amtrak shares with freight railroads. System-wide, Amtrak trains finished 78.6% of their runs on time during the first half of fiscal 2009, up 6.1% from the first six months of fiscal 2008. Every Amtrak train serving Georgia improved its on-time percentage. The best performer was the Crescent, with on-time arrivals 84.6% of the time, an 11.4% improvement over 2008. On the New York-Savannah-Miami route, the Silver Meteor came in on schedule 79.1% of the time, a 10.6% improvement, and the Silver Meteor arrived "on the advertised" 69.2% of the time, a 26.9% improvement. The New York-Savannah Palmetto posted a 72.8% on-time figure, up 16.8% over 2008.

THE INTERNATIONAL. Reacting to President Obama's high-speed rail initiative in the United States, Canadian officials are considering a high-speed rail program for their country... Canada's GO Transit begins a study this summer on the possibility of electrifying its entire Toronto-area commuter rail system... Britain will pay off the debt of London and Continental Railways, which built the tunnel that Eurostar trains use on their trips between London, Paris and Brussels... Britain's "Gatwick Express" train service between London and Gatwick Airport is celebrating its 25th anniversary.

NATIONAL LIMITED. House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman James Overstar (D-MN) says the federal government should provide matching funds for transit projects using the same ratio it uses for highway projects; currently, the feds provide an 80% match for highways, but usually only 50% for transit... Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee Chairman John Rockefeller IV (D-WV) has introduced a surface transportation policy bill that would establish goals for increasing the use of public transit and intercity rail passenger service... US Transportation Secy. Ray LaHood has completed a six-day tour of European transit systems... President Obama's budget proposal for fiscal 2010 includes another \$1 billion for high-speed rail, and \$1.52 billion for Amtrak; the latter figure represents a slight increase over this year's Amtrak funding, but it's lower than the \$1.84 billion funding level requested by Amtrak's Board of Directors... General Electric, which hasn't manufactured passenger locomotives since the 1990's, says it may design a new passenger locomotive for high-speed rail... US Sen. John Tester (D-MT) hosted a public meeting to discuss the possibility of establishing a second Amtrak route across Montana, along the Glendive-Billings-Butte-Missoula line once used by the pre-Amtrak North Coast Limited... Iowa Gov. Chet Culver has endorsed a plan to restore train service between Chicago and Des Moines, and eventually all the way to Omaha, NE... Kansas is seeking \$20 million in

federal funding to upgrade the BNSF Railway line between Kansas City and the Kansas-Oklahoma border for possible passenger service... Dallas and Fort Worth transit officials are seeking private partners to help build a 68-mile passenger rail line that would serve DFW Airport... US Rep. Harry Teague (D-NM) is calling for passenger train service between the Albuquerque area and El Paso, TX... According to a recent survey, 93.5% of the riders on New Mexico's Rail Runner commuter rail line rate the service as good or excellent... New Jersey Transit is starting work on a new eight-mile commuter rail line between Hackensack and Hawthorne; New Jersey also is making plans for another commuter rail line, between Camden and Glassboro... New York City transit officials have approved a 25-cent increase in the base subway fare, to \$2.25, and fare increases averaging 10% on commuter trains... Monthly ridership on the Phoenix Metro light-rail line passed the one-million mark for the first time in April... Transit advocate Clay Chastain says he'll ask the Missouri Supreme Court to overturn a decision by Kansas City officials canceling voter-approved plans for a light-rail system... In the wake of the Los Angeles commuter train crash that killed 25 people last year, Metrolink will install video cameras in locomotives and possibly employ operating crews directly, rather than through a contractor... After a trolley collision injured 50 people in Boston last month, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority is barring streetcar operators, bus drivers and locomotive engineers from having cell phones while on duty... The Colorado Rail Passenger Association has filed a federal suit challenging redevelopment plans for Denver Union Station; it says the plans favor private developers over train and transit riders... Vermont, which funds Amtrak's New York-Rutland Ethan Allen, is moving one of the stops from Fair Haven to Castleton, in hopes of increasing ridership.

DIXIE FLYER. The Tennessee legislature has passed a bill that would help local governments fund transportation projects; the bill has improved prospects for establishing a second Nashville-area commuter rail line, between Nashville and Clarksville... Despite disappointing initial ridership on the Nashville-Lebanon commuter rail line, Nashville Mayor Karl Dean is still supporting the train as "an investment in future mass transit for our city"... US Congressman John Mica (R-FL) says he'll continue to push for Orlando-area commuter rail, despite the Florida legislature's refusal to fund the project: Jacksonville is also pushing ahead with commuter rail plans... Despite the recession and lower gasoline prices, Charlotte's Lynx light rail line carried 15,121 riders in April, up 10% over April of 2008... Amtrak has broken ground for its new Auto Train terminal in Sanford, FL; it's scheduled to be finished in the fall of 2010... Amtrak also plans to build an indoor passenger car maintenance facility in Hialeah, FL, outside Miami... Amtrak has rearranged the passenger cars on the Silver Star, Silver Meteor and Crescent, moving the sleeping cars to the back of the train to reduce noise from the locomotive's engine and horn... A travel feature in the Meridian (Mississippi) Star touted Amtrak's Crescent as "the affordable getaway" for weekend trips to New Orleans.

THE GEORGIAN. A May 17 Atlanta Journal-Constitution story focusing on the CW Matthews Construction Co. illustrated the links between highway contractors and Georgia political leaders, a relationship that has hindered the development of transit and passenger rail... The Atlanta Business Chronicle carried a column by Keith Mason, a onetime Chief of Staff to former Gov. Zell Miller, urging Georgians to support President Obama's high-speed rail plan... The Gainesville-Hall Metropolitan Planning Organization will hold a meeting to discuss the prospects for high-speed rail, from 10 to 11:30 AM on Wednesday, June 10 at Gainesville's Frances Meadows Aquatic and Community Center... MARTA will hold a series of public hearings on its proposed fiscal 2010 budget, which includes service cuts and fare increases; the hearings will take place at Atlanta City Hall and the North Fulton Service Center in Sandy Springs on Tuesday, June 16, and at the South Fulton Service Center in College Park and the Maloof Auditorium in Decatur on June 17; all of the hearings will start at 6 PM... The American Public Transportation Association predicts that 27% of the vacationers visiting Atlanta this summer will use public transit to get around, up 2% from last year... About 100 Georgians including business and political leaders visited Minneapolis-St. Paul on a fact-finding trip that included a ride on the Hiawatha light-rail line; after the trip, veteran Atlanta journalist Maria Saporta wrote that she's worried Atlanta's transportation challenge is "becoming more pronounced with each passing day."

NEXT MEETING: Saturday, June 13, 10 AM

PLACE: Towne Square Condominiums Club Room, 225 East Ponce De Leon Avenue, Downtown Decatur, between Church St. and North Candler St., 1/2 block from the Decatur MARTA station. Building entrance is beside the Subway sandwich shop

PARKING: is available on the streets and elsewhere. If you park in a metered space, feed the meter - the City says they are checked on Saturday. Parking in the Towne Center deck IS NOT FREE.