



Founded 1979

Jim Dexter, *Editor*  
404-687-8753  
editor@garprail.org

Steve Vogel, *President*  
404-373-7530  
president@garprail.org

# The Peach State XPress

News and Views from

## The Georgia Association of Railroad Passengers, Inc.

P.O. Box 851, Decatur, Georgia, 30031

newsletter@garprail.org

www.garprail.org

Copyright © 2009 Georgia Association of Railroad Passengers, Inc.

July 2009

### PERDUE CLIMBS ABOARD THE HIGH-SPEED TRAIN

Maybe all it took was a couple of train rides. After years of apparent disinterest, Gov. Sonny Perdue emerged from a meeting in Washington last month singing the praises -- believe it or not -- of high-speed passenger rail. Spokesman Brent Brantley linked Perdue's new-found interest to recent train rides in Spain and China, but whatever the motivation, his announcement means Georgia will seek a share of \$8 billion in federal stimulus funding earmarked for high-speed rail projects. The Georgia Department of Transportation is scrambling to pull together a state rail plan. That's a good start, but other states are way ahead in this game. Here in the Southeast, both Virginia and North Carolina already fund conventional passenger trains, and both have already completed detailed studies of a proposed high-speed line from Washington, DC, to Charlotte. The high-speed lines proposed for Georgia would be extensions of the Washington-Charlotte line, so if North Carolina and Virginia get funded this year, it could improve Georgia's chances for funding in the future. President Obama has proposed spending another \$5 billion on high-speed rail over the next five years, but in order to get any of that money, Georgia will have to change its ways. Georgia has never funded any form of passenger rail before, and no state is going to get any federal money for high-speed rail unless it agrees to invest some of its own money.

**ONE LAST CHANCE FOR ATLANTA-GRIFFIN?** The "poster child" for Georgia's failure to fund passenger trains is the long-proposed Atlanta-Griffin commuter rail line. For years, Congress has been offering Georgia \$87 million dollars to help start the line, but nothing has ever happened, because Georgia has never agreed to provide operating funds. Gov. Perdue finally announced his support for the Atlanta-Griffin line last summer, but when he submitted his annual budget to the General Assembly, funding for that line was nowhere to be found. Congress was planning to drop the Atlanta-Griffin line from a new transportation authorization bill to be passed this year, but now the Obama Administration is pressing to delay passage of that new bill for 18 months. If the Administration prevails, the old authorization will remain in effect, giving Georgia another year-and-a-half to start work on the Atlanta-Griffin line. If Congress passes the new authorization bill despite the Administration's protests, the Atlanta-Griffin money could disappear this summer.

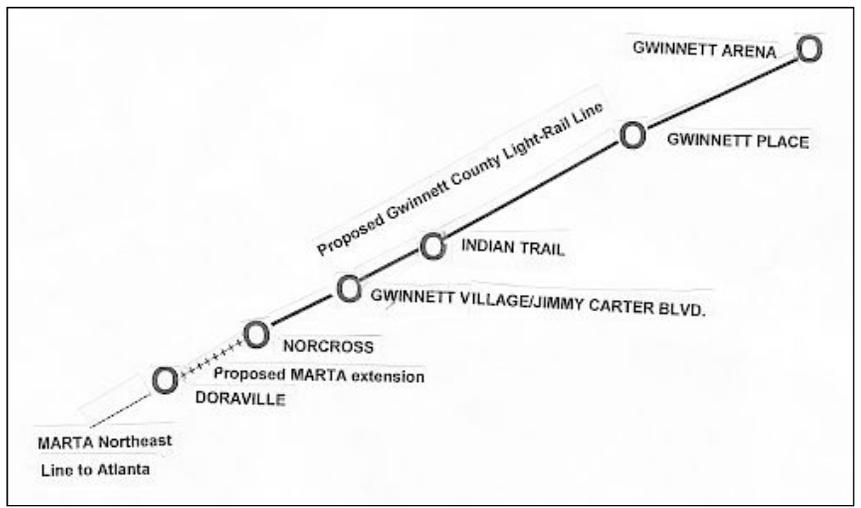
**THE OTHER SIDE OF MIDNIGHT.** The Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority will raise fares and cut service, but MARTA trains will continue to operate past midnight. Bowing to a recession-related plunge in the sales tax revenues that provide most of MARTA's funding, the MARTA Board approved an austerity budget for fiscal 2010. The basic fare will go up 25 cents on Oct. 1, to \$2, and other fares will rise accordingly. There will be longer waits between trains, but the Board rejected a proposal to end rail service at midnight, juggling internal accounts to continue service until the current 1 AM cut-off. While any service reduction is a step backward, it could have been much worse. MARTA was facing the prospect of cutting back to six-day-a-week service until the Atlanta Regional Commission came to the rescue this spring, offering \$25 million in federal stimulus money. The Georgia Regional Transportation Authority and Gov. Sonny Perdue both signed off on that plan last month, but it's only a one-year fix. Expect more fare increases and more service cuts in fiscal 2011, unless there's a new funding plan.

**SHOW US THE MONEY.** According to a new government report, Atlanta is one of America's fastest-growing cities. The US Census Bureau says Atlanta's population grew 3.4% between July 2007 and July 2008, to 520,368 people. And that's just the city. The Atlanta Regional Commission says the 20-county Atlanta metropolitan area grew by 1.1 million people over the past eight years,

and will hit 8.3 million by 2040. ARC says the fastest-growing age group will be senior citizens: the number of Metro Atlantans age 65 and over is expected to swell 318%. All of these figures highlight the need for a massive expansion of transit, but up to this point, the state government has turned a blind eye. And despite Gov. Perdue's 11th-hour enthusiasm for high-speed rail, many transit supporters are already putting their hopes in Georgia's next governor, whomever that may be. With the 2010 election campaign approaching, Atlanta Journal-Constitution columnist Jay Bookman argued that voters need to ask gubernatorial candidates tough questions about transit. Bookman wrote that when it comes to transportation, "We're 10 years behind in a race we can't afford to lose. A candidate who comprehends that fact, and who gets elected on that message, will have the political power to change things. Find that person." The Journal-Constitution also carried a guest column by Brian Leary, a vice president of Atlantic Station, a huge retail-office-residential complex in midtown Atlanta. Leary wrote, "Transportation relief must become a top legislative and executive priority, supported by feasible proposals, a commitment to act and clear measures of success. As voters and citizens, in order to preserve and improve our own quality of life and sustain the success of our community, we must do our research, ask hard questions and hold each candidate accountable on transportation."

**NEW TRANSPORTATION COMMISSIONER.** The Georgia Department of Transportation Board has selected State Representative Vance Smith to be its new Transportation Commissioner replacing Gena Evans, who was fired earlier this year. As chairman of the House Transportation Committee, Smith authored legislation this year that could have provided state funding for some rail transit projects, but most transit advocates thought it was too heavily weighted toward roads and highways. They preferred a State Senate proposal that would have let the Atlanta region form a special tax district to fund transportation. In the end, neither bill passed. As Transportation Commissioner, Smith will have less power than his predecessor, because of the one piece of transportation legislation the General Assembly did pass this year. It created a new position, state transportation planner, which takes over many of the Commissioner's former duties. Gov. Perdue has nominated Todd Long, a former GDOT transportation engineer.

**LIGHT-RAIL FOR GWINNETT?** Attitudes about transit are changing in suburban Atlanta, and Gwinnett County offers a case in point. The Gwinnett Village Community Improvement District has voted to continue exploring the idea of building a 14-mile light-rail line along the Interstate 85 corridor, linking the Gwinnett Convention Center and Arena in Duluth with MARTA's Northeast line to downtown Atlanta. A feasibility study completed in May presumes that the MARTA line would be extended one stop, to Norcross, where passengers could transfer to the proposed light-rail line, with potential stops along that line including Gwinnett Village, Indian Trail Road and Gwinnett Place Mall (see map at right). The study suggested that building a light-rail line would cost only one-third of what it would cost to build a MARTA-style heavy-rail line, and that construction could be completed more quickly. Unlike MARTA heavy-rail, light-rail trains generally operate at surface level using gated street crossings, and stopping at simpler, more frequent stations with low-level boarding platforms. Light-rail trains tend to be shorter than heavy-rail trains, usually one or two cars. The next study, which should take about three months, will look into marketing and potential ridership. Gwinnett voted down MARTA service in 1965 and 1990, but as the county's population continues to soar, officials are looking for alternatives to growing traffic congestion.



**THE INTERNATIONAL.** Canadian public transit ridership grew 3.5% in 2008 to set another all-time high: 1.82 billion trips... Canada's Bombardier has started work on an \$834 million contract to build 204 streetcars for Toronto... Government of Ontario Transit is boosting service on its Toronto-Niagara Falls route, adding another daily round-trip this summer, and extra weekend service year-round; VIA Rail also operates Toronto-Niagara Falls trains... 50 passengers were removed from Canada's Rocky Mountaineer tourist train in Kamloops, BC, after apparently coming down with the flu... China blames brake failure for a passenger train collision that killed three people... Russian prosecutors have charged two suspects in connection with a 2007 explosion that derailed a Moscow-to-St. Petersburg passenger train.

**NATIONAL LIMITED.** DC Metro may run its trains manually for a year or more, after a deadly collision that may have been linked to Metro's automatic control system; 9 people died in the June 22 collision, the deadliest crash in the agency's history... A former Bay Area Rapid Transit police officer has been ordered to stand trial for murder, after a New Year's Day shooting at BART's Fruitvale station in Oakland... Congressional investigators are looking into the resignation of longtime Amtrak Inspector General Fred Weiderhold, amid allegations Amtrak managers interfered with his work... In an apparent effort to combat a recession-related travel slump, Amtrak Guest Rewards is offering bonus points to members who take Amtrak trips between now and Aug. 31... Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada has abandoned his support for magnetic levitation trains between Southern California and Las Vegas; he now says he supports standard-technology high-speed trains... The governors of Illinois and Missouri held a joint news conference to advocate federal funding for a high-speed rail line between Chicago and St. Louis; while the governors back top speeds of up to 110 mph on the line, the Midwest High Speed Rail Association is promoting a more expensive plan that envisions top speeds of up to 220 mph... Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm, who also wants a high-speed line, is pitching her state as a good place to build high-speed trains... Amtrak's Chicago-San Antonio Texas Eagle will add a stop in Hope, AR, the birthplace of President Bill Clinton... Amtrak has reached an agreement with a company that plans to build a 77-room hotel at Baltimore's Penn Station... A 12-million dollar renovation project has started at the Amtrak station in Lancaster, PA, a stop for the New York-Pittsburgh Pennsylvania and New York-Harrisburg Keystone trains... New Mexico's Rail Runner commuter line has carried two million riders in less than three years... Now that it's accepted delivery of 14 new commuter railcars, northern Indiana's South Shore Line is adding two additional weekend frequencies, and modifying its weekday schedule... Denton County, TX has started work on a 21-mile commuter rail line that will connect with Dallas Area Rapid Transit light-rail service into downtown Dallas... DART has approved plans to extend the Orange light-rail line to DFW International Airport, with service to begin in 2013... The City of Dallas is seeking \$80 million in federal funding to plan a streetcar system... Utah will use some of its federal stimulus money to build a new light-rail equipment maintenance facility... Funding issues have forced Phoenix to delay plans to add a three-mile

extension to its popular new light-rail line... The company that owns the Grand Canyon tourist railway has purchased 25 luxury passenger cars from GrandLuxe Rail Journeys, which recently went out of business.

**DIXIE FLYER.** The State of Virginia, which will fund a new Lynchburg-Washington, DC Amtrak round-trip train starting this fall, has signed an agreement to fund another new Amtrak round-trip, between Richmond and Washington, starting in December... Amtrak is expected to issue a report this month on the feasibility of resuming New Orleans-Florida service, suspended since Hurricane Katrina... The Sunset Marketing And Revitalization Team, formed to help promote Amtrak's Los Angeles-New Orleans Sunset Limited, has endorsed a plan to split the route into two segments, with one segment running daily from Los Angeles to San Antonio, TX and then up to Chicago, and with a new connecting train running from San Antonio to New Orleans... The New Orleans Regional Transit Authority is seeking federal money to build three new streetcar lines... Officials in Lakewood, TN, want Nashville's Music City Star commuter trains to stop in their town for two weeks, as a test of potential ridership... Although Music City Star ridership has been disappointing so far, a special seven-car train running to Nashville's July 4th fireworks display was sold out.

**THE GEORGIAN.** Alliance Francaise d' Atlanta, which promotes French culture, is planning an October forum in Atlanta on high-speed rail; it's expected to include French railroad officials who will talk about that country's high-speed TGV trains... The National Association of Railroad Passengers June newsletter included an account of a meeting between NARP Southeast Division Leader Jackson McQuigg and Georgia Congressman John Lewis; McQuigg described Lewis as "a rail advocate who kept a former Mayor of Atlanta waiting while he talked with my delegation about Amtrak"... The City of Atlanta and other groups are seeking up to \$300 million in federal stimulus money for the proposed Peachtree streetcar line... Augusta city officials traveled to Little Rock, AR, to look at its River Rail streetcar line; they're considering building a streetcar line in Augusta... The Savannah Morning News printed a letter proposing a light-rail system for Savannah; the city already has a riverfront streetcar line, mainly for tourists... An Atlanta Journal-Constitution guest column by attorney Lee Kolber declared that Atlanta needs a new railroad station to replace Amtrak's modest Brookwood station, which he called "a sorry excuse for a gateway to any major city"; another AJC guest column, by retired Emory University Professor John Pooler, said Georgia law needs to be changed so that gasoline tax revenues can also be used for transportation purposes other than roads... MARTA suspended a train operator for three days without pay after a rider reported seeing him texting on the job; the rider provided MARTA with a photo showing the operator holding the device, but MARTA says it wasn't clear whether he was actually using it... Macon has started a \$5.3 million renovation project at Terminal Station, which currently houses government offices, but could return to its original use as a railroad station if Atlanta-Macon passenger service is restored.

**THE WORLD ACCORDING TO GARP.** GARP President Steve Vogel was interviewed for an article, "How to Fix Atlanta," that appeared in Atlanta's Sunday Paper weekly; Steve also was interviewed on WGAU Radio in Athens... The Atlanta Journal-Constitution printed letters by GARP's Dick Hodges and Jim Dexter... Once again this year, GARP will have a booth at the Southeastern Railroadiana Show in Norcross on Aug. 8; because that's also GARP normal monthly meeting day, there will be no August meeting; GARP members who want to help staff the booth should contact Steve Vogel at [president@garprail.org](mailto:president@garprail.org) or at 404-373-7530.

**NEXT MEETING:** Saturday, July 11, 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.