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GEORGIA APPLIES FOR HIGH-SPEED RAIL FUNDS

One month after Gov. Sonny Perdue signaled his support for high-speed passenger rail, the Georgia Department of Transportation has filed a pre-application for federal stimulus funding. It seeks \$240 million for "track, signals, grade crossing upgrades, stations and station improvements, parking, maintenance and layover facilities" along the 102-mile Norfolk Southern Railway line between Atlanta, Griffin and Macon. That line is indeed a link in the proposed Southeast High-Speed Rail Corridor from Washington, DC through Georgia to Florida. But ironically, Georgia's pre-application does not propose true high-speed rail, at least not in the beginning. Instead, it proposes three daily round-trip trains between Atlanta and Macon operating at speeds no faster than 79 mph. Georgia is also seeking \$72 million to study other proposed portions of the Southeast High-Speed Corridor, as well as other high-speed plans, involving routes between Atlanta and Birmingham and Atlanta and Chattanooga, TN.

DIDN'T GET THE MEMO? In an address to Cobb County business and professional leaders last month, State Transportation Commissioner Vance Smith declared that high-speed rail is important to Georgia. But despite those sentiments, the state's chances of getting federal high-speed rail money from this year's stimulus fund are uncertain. As of mid-July, the Federal Railroad Administration had already received 278 pre-applications requesting a total of \$102 billion, more than 12 times the \$8 billion that's available. States that got an earlier start on high-speed rail probably have a better chance of getting this year's money, but if it can get up to speed, Georgia might be well positioned for future funding. The US House of Representatives recently voted to spend another \$4 billion on high-speed rail projects in 2010. That would greatly improve Georgia's odds, but unfortunately, some Georgia House members don't seem to understand that. All seven Georgia House Republicans -- Paul Brown, Phil Gingrey, Jack Kingston, Tom Price, Nathan Deal, John Linder and Lynn Westmoreland -- voted to slash funding to \$1 billion. Kingston actually voted to slash funding twice, once on the House floor, and once as a member of the House Appropriations Committee. All six Georgia Democrats -- John Barrow, Sanford Bishop, Hank Johnson, John Lewis, Jim Marshall and David Scott -- voted with the majority of the House in favor of the higher figure.

GOING THE DISTANCE. That high-speed rail appropriation was part of a transportation and housing bill the House passed July 23. The same bill also included \$1.5 billion for Amtrak. The National Association of Railroad Passengers is urging the Senate to approve a higher appropriation, closer to the \$1.84 billion funding level Amtrak requested. Full funding would allow Amtrak to go ahead with plans to buy at least 130 new single-level railcars, including 25 Viewliner sleepers and 25 Viewliner diners for use on Amtrak's eastern long-distance trains. The new dining cars would replace the 50-year-old diners now operating on three trains serving Georgia: the Crescent, the Silver Meteor the Silver Star. The new sleepers could allow Amtrak to expand sleeping car capacity on those same trains. The order also would include baggage and crew dormitory cars, currently in short supply across the entire national system, and it would be a vote of confidence in the future of Amtrak's long-distance trains. Amtrak recently invited manufacturers to submit bids. In the meantime, Amtrak is employing another tactic to expand its fleet. It's using stimulus money to rebuild wrecked cars into "like new" condition, and get them back into service. The first rebuilt car has already emerged from the shops: it's num-

ber 25103, an "Amfleet II" single-level coach that was built in 1982 and damaged in a yard collision four years ago. It will go into the eastern long-distance coach fleet, which means it's likely to turn up in Georgia from time to time. In all, Amtrak will rebuild 81 passenger cars and 15 locomotives.

SUNSET UNLIMITED? Northern Georgia has the Crescent. Eastern Georgia has the Silver Meteor, the Silver Star and the Palmetto. But southwestern Georgia is a different story. Up until 2005, people living there could drive to the Florida Panhandle to board Amtrak's Sunset Limited, running three days a week between Los Angeles and Orlando. But Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast in August of that year, wrecking the tracks on the eastern leg of the Sunset's route. CSX restored rail freight service to the line after a few months, but Amtrak made no move to restore the New Orleans-Orlando leg of the Sunset. Last year, Congress ordered Amtrak to report on options for reinstating Gulf Coast service, and finally last month, that report was released. Amtrak identified three top options for restoring service. The first option would restore the old status quo, by again running the tri-weekly Sunset from Los Angeles all the way to Orlando. Amtrak says that option would be the cheapest and quickest way to re-establish service and would require the lowest subsidy, but it would carry the fewest passengers. The second option would extend Amtrak's daily Chicago-New Orleans train, the City of New Orleans, to Orlando. Amtrak says this option would serve the most passengers. The third and most expensive option would be a separate daily train between New Orleans and Florida. While the first option, the Sunset extension, would require no new equipment, Amtrak says options two or three would require "the acquisition of between six and 14 new passenger cars, at a cost of \$24 million to \$63 million." Amtrak says all three options would require \$32 million in infrastructure spending, including repairs to stations and improvements to Amtrak's Sanford, FL maintenance facility. Congress must now decide whether it likes any of the three options enough to provide funding. According to Amtrak, the annual subsidy requirement would range anywhere from \$4.8 million to \$18.4 million, depending on which option is chosen. Although that might sound like a lot of money, it compares favorably with most of Amtrak's other overnight long-distance trains, which last year required subsidies ranging from \$6.9 million for the New York-Chicago Cardinal to \$33.1 million for the Chicago-San Francisco California Zephyr.

RUDE AWAKENING. The Atlanta Business Chronicle reports that a recent survey of seven major US cities shows that Atlanta has the rudest drivers. That shouldn't be surprising: there's a reason for the road rage. This year's Texas Transportation Institute Urban Mobility Report confirms that Atlanta still endures some of the nation's worst traffic congestion. The report says the average Atlanta-area commuter spent 57 hours stuck in traffic jams during 2007, the last year for complete data. "Failure to deal with the region's miserable traffic will eventually choke off growth," wrote Atlanta Journal-Constitution columnist Cynthia Tucker, adding, "As congestion grows over the next decade, metro Atlanta's declining quality of life will cease attracting the top-flight industries and the highly educated workers that the area needs." Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce President Sam Williams told the AJC, "We've got to have action and leadership." But so far, there's little sign the state's elected leaders are listening. In a recent newspaper column, State Rep. Bob Smith (R-Watkinsville), wrote, "Why should we continue to finance sidewalks, bike paths, bus rapid transit, rail projects and other ideas when they harken to a bygone era?" Smith thinks we should all work from home, over the computer. The next time you're late for work because of traffic congestion, maybe you should refer your boss to Rep. Bob Smith.

NOTCHES IN THE BELT. More property is being assembled for the Atlanta Beltline, the 22-mile park and rail transit loop planned around downtown Atlanta. Atlanta Beltline, Inc. has leased two more pieces of old railroad right-of-way -- three miles in southwest Atlanta and one-third of a mile on the southeast side -- with a three-year option to purchase. Interviewed in Atlanta's Creative Loafing weekly, Beltline spokesman Ethan Davidson declared that the Beltline has reached "critical mass," and added, "Over the next two years, the Beltline will become less of a buzzword and more of a reality." Atlanta is depending on the Beltline to drive new development, particularly housing, but many observers worry that the transit aspect is moving too slowly to promote that development. Former Atlanta Planning Commissioner Mike Dobbins told Creative Loafing, "There's not going to be any type of transportation in any kind of near-term framework. The market's not going to be effective where there's no transportation." The construction timetable for Beltline transit needs to be stepped up. Atlanta Mayoral candidates Lisa Borders, Mary Norwood and Kasim Reed will discuss the Beltline and other transportation issues at a Sept. 29 forum at Atlanta's All Saints Episcopal Church.

THE INTERNATIONAL. A strike by locomotive engineers halted Via Rail Canada service for three days... Via Rail no longer uses names for most of its trains; the only remaining Via "name trains" are the two long-distance flagships: the Canadian, between Toronto and Vancouver, and the Ocean, between Montreal and Halifax... Canada will spend \$300 million (Canadian) to boost track capacity on Via's busy Montreal-Toronto corridor... Britain will spend \$1.8 billion to electrify a rail line from London into Wales; it also will electrify a 30-mile line between Manchester and Liverpool... Britain will seek a new private operator for its busy East Coast Main Line between London and Edinburgh; the previous operator, National Express, couldn't keep up with its franchise payments... Australian officials have unveiled plans for the first expansion of the Sydney Metro system... The United Arab Emirates plans to build a national railway to operate freight and passenger service... Prosecutors have charged the president of the West Japan Railway Co. with professional negligence in connection with a 2005 commuter train derailment that killed 107 people; he denied any wrongdoing, but resigned hours later.

NATIONAL LIMITED. After lengthy negotiations between Washington State and Canada, Amtrak will add a second daily round-trip on its Seattle-Vancouver, BC line, running at least through the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics... Seattle has opened its first light-rail line; the 14-mile line runs from downtown to suburban Tukwila, and service to Sea-Tac Airport is expected to begin by the end of the year... New Jersey Transit has opened a new line to the Meadowlands Sports Complex, home of the New York Giants and New York Jets football teams; trains will operate

on 10 or 20 minute headways before all major sports events... The Denver Regional Transportation District has purchased a Union Pacific Railroad industrial line for conversion into a transit line... Investigators say a switch malfunction caused a monorail collision at Walt Disney World in Florida; the operator of one of the trains died... The final report on last year's Boston trolley collision says the operator who died in the crash ran through a red stop signal, apparently because of an undiagnosed sleep disorder... Investigators looking into the deadly June crash on the DC Metro system say there were problems with a signal system that pinpoints train locations... San Francisco's Bay Area Rapid Transit raised fares 6.1% last month; In September, San Francisco's Caltrain commuter rail agency plans to raise fares and cut midday service... New York City Transit plans to cut 360 jobs, primarily by attrition... The Chicago Transit Authority has stopped removing seats from railcars; the move was intended to increase standing room, but many passengers complained... In a bid to position itself for federal high-speed rail funds, Wisconsin has agreed to purchase two 14-car trainsets for use between Chicago and Milwaukee; as part of the agreement, the manufacturer, Talgo, will set up a factory in Wisconsin... The government's latest Transportation Energy Data Book shows that all forms of rail transit increased their energy efficiency in 2007 while highway modes worsened slightly; Amtrak trains were found to be 19% more energy efficient than airliners, and 28% more energy efficient than cars.

DIXIE FLYER. The new Amtrak station in Durham, NC opened July 8; the renovated 1897 tobacco warehouse features a 6,000-square-foot waiting room; four trains stop there every day... A survey indicates that 72% of the riders on Charlotte's new Lynx light-rail line are new to transit... The Florida Department of Transportation is seeking \$70 million in federal stimulus funds to restore passenger train service along the Florida East Coast Railway between Jacksonville and Miami; Amtrak's current Jacksonville-Miami route is further inland... Faced with state reluctance to provide long-term funding, the South Florida Regional Transportation Agency may dip into its reserves to keep Tri-Rail commuter train service running at its current service level for another year.

THE GEORGIAN. As part of its application for high-speed rail funds, the Georgia Department of Transportation has released an 81-page state rail report covering both passenger and freight service; it calls for the eventual establishment of multiple intercity and commuter train routes in Georgia, but is vague about the prospects for state funding... State legislators from Georgia's Eighth Congressional District have elected a retired road builder, Sidney Ross of Ocilla, to the State Transportation Board; he'll fill the vacancy created by the resignation of Larry Walker, a strong supporter of commuter rail... The Atlanta City Council is seeking \$300 million in federal stimulus funds for the proposed Peachtree streetcar route... In addition to the \$25 million Atlanta's MARTA transit system received to maintain seven-day-a-week service, it's getting \$74 million in federal stimulus money to upgrade fire protection systems at MARTA rail stations, and \$685,980 for terrorism prevention... An Atlanta Journal-Constitution travel section feature on New Orleans included Amtrak fare information... Former Georgia Rail Passenger Authority member E.H. Culpepper has died at the age of 69; he was a strong booster of Atlanta-Athens commuter rail service, and he will be missed.

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO GARP. The National Association of Railroad Passengers July newsletter noted that GARP President Steve Vogel is a new member of NARP's Council of Representatives... Steve also authored a guest writer column on Maria Saporta's blog, www.saportareport.com... Many GARP members receive the email version of the Peach State XPress; if you're interested in switching to email, send a request to www.garprail.org...

In lieu of holding an August meeting, GARP members will be staffing a table at the Southeast Railroadiana Show, Saturday, Aug. 8 at the North Atlanta Trade Center; if you're going to the show, stop by the GARP table and say hi!

NEXT MEETING: No regular meeting in August. Come to the railroad show !