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February 8, 2022

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Cynthia T. Brown
Chief of the Section of Administration
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Surface Transportation Board
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ENTERED
Office of Proceedings
February 9, 2022
Part of
Public Record

Re: Gulf Coast Passenger Service Between New Orleans and Mobile
STB Finance Docket No. 36496

Dear Surface Transportation Board Members:

I am writing to express concerns about Amtrak's plan to add passenger service along the Gulf Coast without making any infrastructure improvements and the precedent that sets. This plan will negatively affect freight rail customers and communities between New Orleans, Louisiana, and Mobile, Alabama, and beyond. These harms, if left unmitigated, will ripple across the entire U.S. rail network and will surely be felt in my district in neighboring Florida.

Coming out of the pandemic, Americans understand how critical our interconnected supply chain is to our daily lives. When the supply chain is strained, we all suffer. Goods we need cannot get to market. Prices rise and shortages develop. Local economies that rely on effective freight transportation to sustain job-creating industries are depressed.

Now more than ever, to fully recover from the pandemic, we need initiatives that improve supply chain capacity. I believe that Amtrak's current proposal before the Board does the exact opposite. It threatens the regional and national supply chain by diverting limited freight capacity to passenger service, impairing the service that freight customers receive in this corridor and beyond. I find this outcome to be unacceptable. Fortunately, there is a better way.

The affected railroads, CSX and Norfolk Southern, have come to the Board with proposed infrastructure improvements that will preserve freight capacity and service levels while allowing Amtrak to operate a quality passenger service on the line. The railroads have done so by embracing, what I understand, to be best

practices in transportation planning. They have created a detailed operations simulation that accounts for the growing needs of freight customers in the region over a reasonable, 20-year period, in accordance with federal guidelines and comparable studies.

In light of Amtrak's refusal to provide a detailed operational study of its own, I urge the Board to consider carefully evaluating the CSX and Norfolk Southern proposal. It is imperative that adequate infrastructure be in place before the start of passenger service so that freight customers and communities are not harmed.

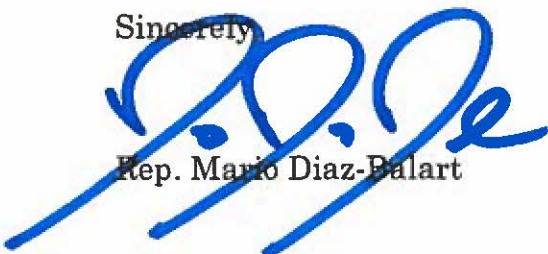
Just as importantly, I believe Amtrak should bear the full costs its service would impose on the freight network in the Gulf Coast. In refusing to fund infrastructure upgrades and in acknowledging that freight impacts will result from its service, Amtrak essentially demands a free pass onto the corridor.

These costs are real: to the federal government that has invested in ports and terminals to enhance the supply chain; to the freight railroads to build infrastructure to restore lost capacity; to shippers to accept service delays, lower reliability, or higher shipping costs; to communities to accept longer wait times at blocked railroad crossings; and to air quality when freight trains must excessively idle in wait for passenger trains. Amtrak's cost-shifting gambit is all the more untenable given the billions Amtrak received from Congress just a few months ago. Amtrak has the money and should cover the full cost of its new service.

I support the expansion of passenger rail service in this country when done the right way: by bearing its own costs and operating safely. We have examples here in Florida with Brightline. Brightline's passenger service is coexisting well with freight because its private backers studied and invested in the appropriate level of infrastructure to support the service, although more needs to be done for the public at at-grade crossings. As Amtrak looks toward expansion here and around the nation, it should follow that model and similarly expect to invest.

In accordance with all rules and regulations, I believe that the Board should require Amtrak to fund and facilitate the construction of all appropriate infrastructure on the Gulf Coast line so that any impairment to the supply chain is avoided. Thank you for your full and fair consideration of this matter, consistent with applicable agency guidelines.

Sincerely,



Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart