

GRPC Director's Report

April 2016

Project Updates by Elaine Wilkinson

Having served as executive director for the planning agency since 2002, much of my time has been spent on management and administrative matters. There have been opportunities during my tenure, however, to work on some remarkable projects and studies that helped satiate my desire to remain active in planning. Recently, several projects have evolved that I am excited to report GRPC has a role in the initial study and potentially implementation. I'll present a brief overview here (as presented to the Harrison County Board of Supervisors) with assurance there will be much greater information and details to follow.

Joint Land Use Studies (JLUS) for Keesler AFB and Naval CBC

The JLUS is funded in part by the Department of Defense (DOD) and is intended to strengthen the relationship between the military installation and civilian community by discussing the active and planned military missions associated with the base and the growth and development of the community in proximity to these operations. Go to <http://www.oea.gov/> for information on the JLUS and other program areas.

The DOD has approved two grants to develop two JLUS, one for Keesler Air Force Base (KAFB) and a second for the Naval Construction Battalion Center (NCBC). The two JLUS will address the primary military operations conducted on the coast, such as training and combat/deployment readiness. The geographic areas for these studies include: Biloxi and D'Iberville (some of Harrison County) for the KAFB JLUS and Gulfport, Long Beach, Woolmarket and Hancock County (Stennis and the Pearl River) for the NCBC JLUS.

Recommendations of the two JLUS may include as follows: to improve communications and exchange of information between the base and community; to alter practices (military or civilian) that disrupt the routine conduct of business and daily life; to provide for additional facilities, improvements or services to accommodate future growth and development by the base and community; and, to adopt policies and practices that protect and enhance the stability of the military missions and the quality of life for the community. Recommendations will be presented as part of an implementation plan that will describe the necessary actions, costs associated with the action and funding sources as needed.

GRPC is the project sponsor for the NCBC JLUS and the project administrator for the KAFB JLUS. The city of Biloxi is the sponsor of the KAFB JLUS. GRPC will assist in data collection and coordination of activities and administration and monitoring of the contracts.

The cities and counties are key participants in the development of the JLUS and have a vital role in preparing the recommendations and implementation plan. There will be opportunities for the public, private and civic leaders, along with the military, to engage in the process throughout the development of the JLUS. Elected officials will be asked to attend key meetings and have a representative on the policy committee for each JLUS. The general public and stakeholders will be included in workshops, surveys and meetings, and receive project updates on the website.

Passenger Rail and the Gulf Coast Working Group

The Southern Rail Commission has made significant progress in their efforts to develop new rail service in Louisiana and to promote the restoration of passenger rail along the Gulf Coast. There has been growing support at the state and federal level for the New Orleans to Orlando train service.

In December 2015 Amtrak published their report on the options to restore the passenger service along the coast, go to

<http://static1.squarespace.com/static/5302778ee4b07a6f640874ef/t/5670735bd8af10d0d84e4965/145021013>

[9160/Gulf+Coast+Initiative+Report+2015.pdf](#) It is an analytical study of the service options and quantifies the ridership, revenues and costs to operate the alternatives. This is the working document that the Federal Railroad Administration is using to guide the next phase of project development. The best option is considered to be the daily service provided by extending the *City of New Orleans* train from New Orleans to Orlando, Florida. This option could be supplemented by the addition of a daily commuter train, with state-funded assistance. The hours of operation would service the MS Gulf Coast during daytime travel hours and the on-time percentage would be significantly improved from the previous train service, the extension of the *Sunset Limited*.

Congress recently passed, and President Obama signed into law, the "Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act," known as the FAST Act. As the first comprehensive surface transportation authorization in several years, the FAST Act outlined a variety of potentially transformative programs and initiatives to benefit the nation's transportation system. One such initiative, appearing in Section 11304, mandated the establishment of a Gulf Coast Working Group to evaluate the restoration of intercity passenger rail service in the Gulf Coast region between New Orleans and Orlando.

Under the legislative mandate, the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) is to serve as the Chair of the Working Group. The FAST Act also calls for participation in the Working Group by Amtrak, the Southern Rail Commission, Gulf Coast States, planning organizations, other municipalities and communities along the proposed route selected by the Federal Railroad Administrator, railroad carriers whose tracks may be used for such service, and other entities determined appropriate by the Secretary of Transportation. The FRA Administrator invited the GRPC Executive Director to serve on the Gulf Coast Working Group.

The Amtrak report did not identify the needed improvements to the local stations and the CSX trackage to allow for the passenger train to operate over the CSX tracks with minimal disruption. The Working Group will be undertaking several tasks:

- Work with jurisdictions and organizations to identify potential markets for the train service
- Maintain communication with the local jurisdictions and organizations
- Discuss the need for station improvements, including location, parking and ADA compliance.
- Provide data and information to the FRA consultants and CSX to perform route service analysis to quantify additional costs for facility and infrastructure improvements.
- Review and provide feedback on materials and the final document to be presented to Congress

The role of GRPC has always been one of providing technical assistance to the local jurisdictions with information and data to support the decision-making process. In fact, most of the agency's work evolves around our well established and highly recognized transportation planning activities. The GRPC staff maintain the planning certification required of the metropolitan planning organization (MPO) and GRPC/MPO is the management and administrative arm of the Surface Transportation Program for the coastal counties and cities.

The evolution of projects, such as the JLUS and passenger rail planning, are consistent with the agency and MPO goals to serve in an advisory capacity to the jurisdictions on issues and matters affecting the long-term growth and development of the coast. These are two projects that directly support sustainable economic growth and enhance the quality of life for our residents.

Elaine G. Wilkinson
Executive Director