



Photo Credit: John Hollis Tackett

RAIL PASSENGERS
ASSOCIATION

FRIDAY HOTLINE

#1431

MARCH 6TH, 2026



Association News

Models Show Mardi Gras' Untapped Potential

[by Jim Mathews / President & CEO](#)

By now, everyone knows Amtrak's new Mardi Gras Gulf Coast service between New Orleans and Mobile has been wildly successful, beating a full year's ridership predictions in just a few months. Like the Borealis a year earlier between Minneapolis/St. Paul and Chicago, the huge demand to get aboard the Mardi Gras is proof that a great service with a convenient schedule and great timekeeping will always be a winner.

Gulf Coast communities served by the Mardi Gras are already seeing benefits, as curious leisure travelers hop off in wonderful places like Bay St. Louis or Pascagoula, checking out uncrowded beaches and cool little art studios. And a lot of people are discovering that [Mobile is about a lot more than just jumping on a cruise ship](#). As for NFL gameday when the Saints are at home? Amtrak has had to add an extra coach on Football Sundays.

But recent work by the Association's data team suggests that as great a success story as the Mardi Gras is today, it could be even better. Our modeling already told us that, based on the demographics and economic characteristics of the served communities, the Mardi Gras was going to outperform expectations. And that's what it did, [blowing past its annual ridership projections](#) in just the first six months of service. **But our models suggest that the Mardi Gras could carry even more passengers and provide even greater economic benefit for entire Gulf Coast region if Amtrak could add more coaches to the trains.**

Before the Mardi Gras Service kicked off last August, Amtrak predicted annual ridership of 71,000 passengers. Since entering service the Mardi Gras has been on track to far exceed that estimate, carrying 59,000 passengers by the end of calendar year 2025, reaching 70,500 by the end of January, and projected to carry 160,000 passengers in Fiscal 2026 if it maintains consistent average monthly ridership.

Accounting for the capacity of the trains operating the service, monthly ridership is consistent with the total number of seats available on two- to three-car trains at between 85 percent and 90 percent load factor. But we see enough demand for perhaps even a five-coach train every day.

Rail Passengers' model predicts that at the current frequency of two daily trains in each direction, 170,424 passengers would ride the Mardi Gras every year, or an average of 14,201 passengers per month. That latter figure is within five percent of actual Mardi Gras ridership during its busiest month to date, October 2025.

[READ MORE](#)

USDOT Looks to Speed Delivery of IJA Rail Funding

[by Sean Jeans-Gail, VP of Gov't Affairs + Policy](#)

Media reports indicate that the U.S. Department of Transportation is launching a new initiative to accelerate the delivery of rail grants authorized by the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), delivering funding for projects ahead of November's midterms.

[According to Bloomberg Government](#), the USDOT initiative centers around a plan to award two years' worth of Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) Program projects by September 2026. Fasttracking the awards could benefit hundreds of shortline railroads — and the communities they serve — through upgrades to freight rail infrastructure. *Bloomberg Government* reports that sources close to the department believe this could lead to a wave of groundbreaking opportunities for GOP incumbents, as the Trump Administration looks for ways to help candidates highlight economic bright spots in a faltering economy.

Passenger Rail Could Benefit as Well

However, it's not just short line freight railroads that may stand to benefit. The FRA still has billions in IIJA funds [to distribute across several rail programs](#) — including over [\\$4 billion in funds from the Federal-State Partnership \(FSP\) for Intercity Passenger Rail Program](#). The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) solicited applications for the FSP – National Network Program in late 2025; it would be welcome news if these funds were targeted for accelerated development, as well.

For passenger rail advocates, accelerating the deployment of funds represents a significant opportunity. IIJA rail programs support a wide range of improvements that directly benefit riders, including grade-crossing eliminations, signaling upgrades, station upgrades, new equipment procurement, and capacity improvements, among others. These investments strengthen safety, reliability, and connectivity for communities of all sizes.

Expedited Application Timeline is Welcome News

Bloomberg Government reports that USDOT is considering giving CRISI applicants less than 60 days to prepare submissions for fiscal 2025 and 2026 funding rounds — a compressed timeline could help the department hit its September target.

While *Bloomberg* raised the possibility of a condensed application period leading to mistakes, *Rail Passengers* applauds this effort by the USDOT to accelerate the delivery of funds to rail projects. Consistent federal investment—with an emphasis on *consistent*—is the best way to ensure that public infrastructure funds are well spent. Eligible entities—including states, regional transportation authorities, interstate rail compacts, Amtrak, tribes, and freight railroads—have had multiple years and multiple rounds of applications to develop a pipeline of rail projects. Our association believes there is an ample pool of quality projects awaiting funding.

Moreover, this would be a welcome change in strategy from the Trump Administration, which has slowed down the delivery of federal funding to critical rail projects over concern about [the role of "DEI" in project selection and implementation](#). These projects include Amtrak's Hudson River Tunnel Project, MTA's 2nd Avenue Extension, CTA's Red Line Extension, and the CTA's Red and Purple Modernization Program. That doesn't include scores of other critical rail projects where disbursement of federal funds was slowed to give Trump Administration officials time to review the terms of agreements crafted under the Biden Administration.

Next Steps

Ultimately, it's good when political candidates are excited to point to government investment in rail projects. Of course, those same politicians need to actually vote *for* the infrastructure bills that provide this funding.

The good news is: Congress has an opportunity [to extend these programs this year](#). We hope voters are watching.

Volunteers Getting It Done!

[by Jim Mathews / President & CEO](#)

From getting a handle on our internal tech assets to advancing our in-house economic-benefits modeling, our new Professional Staff volunteers are making a real, tangible difference every day here at the Rail Passengers Association.

I couldn't be more proud of all the great things they're accomplishing on behalf of everyone in America who wants more and better trains, everywhere. And pretty soon, you'll see their work in our marketing materials, promotional messages, and in standing up our new Consumer Affairs advocacy team.

You can meet the team, at least virtually, by checking out our new Team page, highlighting our Professional Staff, our Board of Directors, and our elected Council of Representatives, as well as our governing documents as an IRS-recognized nonprofit. As more join us, we'll be adding to that page, so check back frequently. And if you have an idea or question about a particular subject area, a quick check of our Meet the Team page will help you discover the right person to contact.

Field Notes

Amtrak Pro-Tip: If you have companion coupons, or Amtrak Guest Rewards 10 percent discount coupons, or something similar to use the next time you book a trip, for the time being you might be better off calling Amtrak Guest Rewards directly to apply the coupon and finish booking your trip. That's because the program rules say that you must apply coupons at the time of booking -- but lately both the Amtrak app and the Amtrak website are struggling with getting coupons applied to transactions. Sometimes it's not even offering the passenger an opportunity during the booking process to enter the coupon code. It's a known issue, and they're working on it, but the Call Center advised me this week that you'll always be able to use the coupons if you call them directly at 1-800-307-5000.

Please email [Joe Aiello](mailto:joe.aiello@narprail.org) if you have any local, state or regional stories/projects (even something you know or experienced happening overseas) that you would like to write about and see highlighted in the Hotline.

Calling All Readers!

Do you have a favorite transit/train photo (or photos) you have taken from your travels around the country, or even around the world? Would you like to see them featured in our Hotline social media post each week (with credit, of course)?

Send them to us @ hotline@narprail.org with the subject "HOTLINE PHOTO"

Hotline Links

A curated selection of passenger rail and transportation stories from this week. Check out our social media feeds to read breaking news and join the conversation!

[Analysis: New CBO projection accounting for Trump administration policies shows Americans will pay billions more in fuel taxes, Transportation For America](#)

Our friends at T4A have released an analysis of the yearly Congressional Budget Office tax projections report - which shows taxpayers forking over billions in new gas taxes, but not making dent in the soon-to-be empty Highway Trust Fund.

[Winnemucca - Least Used Amtrak Station in Nevada, Miles in Transit](#)

Miles in Transit & high quality content - name a better combo!

[Pacific Surfliner Train Service Shut Down This Weekend Between SLO, San Diego, Noozhawk](#)

Continued critical track projects (signal upgrades, bluff stabilization, etc.) will cause a temporary shut down of Surfliner service between San Luis Obispo and San Diego this weekend

[New legislation would require railroads to conduct automated and human track inspections, Trains](#)

There has been a lot of talk from the Class 1s about fully-automated track inspections, but new bipartisan legislation announced yesterday would keep the human element directly involved for any FRA Class 3 track or higher

[Federal judge says Trump administration can't kill NYC's congestion pricing tolls, Gothamist](#)

Since implemented in Jan. of 2025, NYC's congestion pricing has brought about a 22% drop in particulate pollution, an 11% drop in traffic, and raised over \$540M for public transit projects. Now a federal judge has ruled it can continue.

[Restore Shore Line East for economy, equity, and climate, CT Mirror](#)

Blaize Levitan, Secretary of the CT Public Transit Council, pens this op-ed calling for the return of full pre-2020 commuter service between New Haven & New London - helping ease traffic on I-95, one of the most congested and

polluted corridors in the US

[Trump's Transportation Secretary Announces \\$100 Million in Funding to Enhance Public Transportation in 2026 FIFA World Cup Host Cities, Federal Transit Administration](#)

The USDOT is putting over \$100M into the public transit systems of World Cup cities to help them get ready to host matches this summer.

[Amtrak to seek applicants for new B&P Tunnel community grants, Progressive Railroading](#)

As part of the overall Frederick Douglass Tunnel project, Amtrak is seeking non-profits and city/state governments to apply for Community Investment Program (CIP) grants to help mitigate the impact construction will have. This includes things like the creation of new open spaces and workforce & community development.

[FY 2026 Competitive Funding Opportunity: All Stations Accessibility Program, Grants.gov](#)

The FTA posted a Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) this week for nearly \$700M in the All Stations Accessibility Program - which helps fund ADA upgrades to aging rail and commuter stations (built pre-ADA) around the country.

[Tahoe by Public Transit? How to Get There by Train or Bus — and How to Get Around When You're There, WQED](#)

Looking to travel to Lake Tahoe without a car - passenger rail is a big part of getting you there.



**WE ARE WORKING ON A DISCORD SERVER.
STAY TUNED FOR MORE INFORMATION**

If you aren't following Rail Passengers on social media, you should be! We are covering all the breaking news America's passengers need to stay informed on local, regional, and national issues.

Upcoming Events

Advocacy Workshops + Council Business Meeting

RAIL PASSENGERS ASSOCIATION

2026 DC WORKSHOPS + Days on the Hill

April 20th - April 24th, 2026

Rail Passengers Office
1200 G St NW, Suite 520

[DC ADVOCACY WORKSHOPS REGISTRATION](#)

Registration is \$125.00

Due to the space limitations of our office, each of the sessions is **limited to 20 tickets** and there will be no on-site or virtual registration. Please attend the session for the state you reside in. **Registration ends at Midnight eastern on Friday, April 10th.**

The in-office workshops will run from 8:00a to 4:00p. Lunch will be provided (*attendees are responsible for their own breakfast*). Attendees will be responsible for securing their own lodging needs.

Stay tuned to www.railpassengers.org/dc2026 for more information.





[2026 SPRING COUNCIL BUSINESS MEETING REGISTRATION](#)

In-person registration is \$99
Virtual registration is free

The 2026 Spring Council Business Meeting will take place on Wednesday, April 22nd from 8:00a to 4:00p. Lunch will be provided (*attendees are responsible for their own breakfast*). Registration ends on Friday, April 10th at Midnight eastern. There will be no on-site registration.

Stay tuned to www.railpassengers.org/2026SpringCouncilMeeting for more information.

Local Meetings + Events

Please contact Joe Aiello (jaiello@narprail.org) to have a local, state or regional meeting added to the Rail Passengers calendar (print and on-line) of upcoming events!

Staff Updates

Your staff is at the table, in the field, having the conversations that make a difference for passengers across the country. Learn what they're up to each week and how you can support your Association's key missions!

- **Jim Mathews, President & CEO**, met with Federal Railroad Administration staff, spoke with congressional allies, began conversations with state-level rail authorities worried about the potential effects of the proposed Union Pacific acquisition of Norfolk Southern, and consulted on continuing refinements of our internal ridership projection models.
- **Sean Jeans-Gail, Vice President of Policy**, took part in the short line industry's Railroad Day on the Hill, spoke with USDOT officials about ways to improve Amtrak efficiency and accountability, and discussed opportunities to increase service with railroad stakeholders.
- **Jonsie Stone, Chief of Staff**, processed membership dues and donations sent to the DC office, worked on fundraising solicitations, and tended to the Association's administrative/operational needs.
- **Joe Aiello, Director of Community Engagement & Organizing**, worked with members of our Candidate Certification Committee to finalize the 2026/28 Council election and begin outreach for the upcoming Board of Directors election process.
- **Kimberly Notarianni, Membership Management Consultant**, continues to work closely with our constituents on membership renewals, new memberships, troubleshooting access to the User Center, password resets, and adding additional sub-memberships for those who qualify for that benefit.

Apply for Volunteer Staff at Rail Passengers Association

**VOLUNTEERS
NEEDED**



[CLICK HERE TO LEARN MORE!](#)

Membership How-To

Are you a current member and need help with your account number, username, etc.?

[Click Here For Our Membership "How-To" Page](#)

NOTICE: Looking for your 2025 membership/donation tax documents?

[Click here](#) for instructions.

We Have Merch!

New items available!



Tell Us Your Story



Visit our Store



Discuss This
Week's Hotline



Service Updates
& Timetables



Visit the General
Membership Group



View Webinars



Rail Passengers'
Social Media



Take Action

Rail Passengers Timetables



Thanks to a collaborative effort between Rail Passengers NYS Council Member Nathanael Nerode & juckins.net's Chris Juckins, we have been able to completely update our timetables resource page.

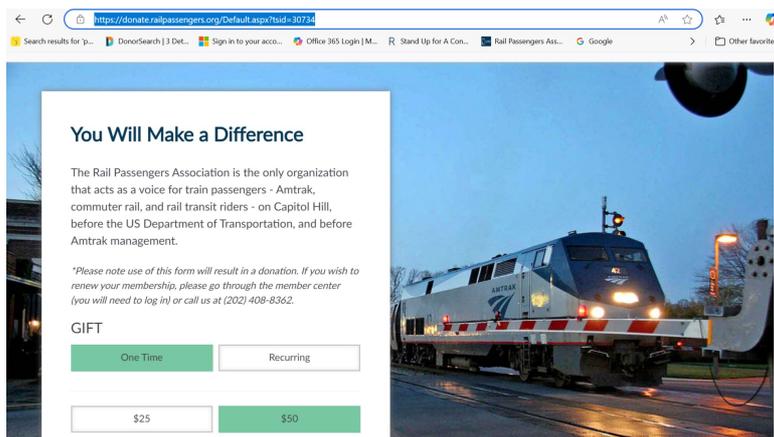
CLICK HERE

NOTE: Because we do update the links on our website - please bookmark **the main page** and not the individual schedules

Donate Online with Confidence

You can donate to the Rail Passengers Association online with confidence, knowing your credit card information is secure. Charity Engine uses industry-standard SSL technology to keep your information secure. Don't wait for a paper appeal to donate, support the Association today by donating here. When the web browser shows a lock next to the URL, it means that it's an HTTPS, and it's secure:

<https://donate.railpassengers.org/Default.aspx?tsid=30734>



LOOKING FOR SMARTER
WAYS TO DONATE?



MAKING A CONTRIBUTION
HAS NEVER BEEN EASIER!

Do more with your donations. If you have questions about employer match, gifting a membership, or other questions about how to make a bigger

impact, let us know! Your staff is here to help with:

- Online Donations
- Donor Advised Funds
- Employer Match
- RPA Signature Visa Card
- Gift of Membership
- and More!

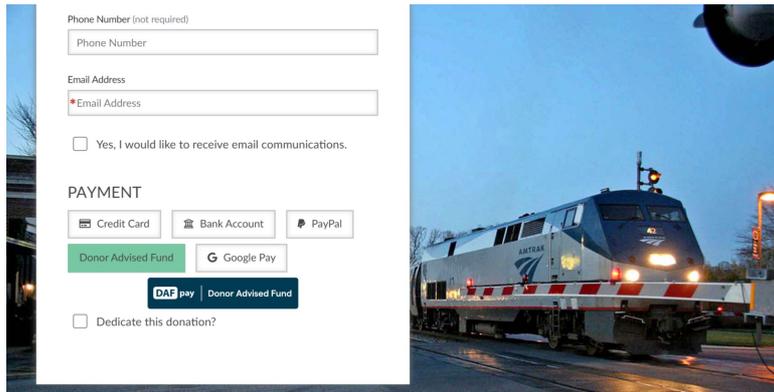
With multiple secure, protected methods of payment, you have more flexibility in the way dues are paid. Skip the hassle and [contact us](#) today for help setting up automatic or online payments.

- Setup ACH or E-Check with your bank of choice
- Use a Debit or Credit Card to pay online, or
- Send a check to 1200 G Street NW Suite 520 Washington, DC 20005

Use Your Donor Advised Fund (DAF) to Donate, Renew or Join Online

You can now donate or join/renew your membership, online, through your donor advised fund using DAFpay. All Rail Passengers forms now include a “Donor Advised Fund” button under Payment.

Donation Form:

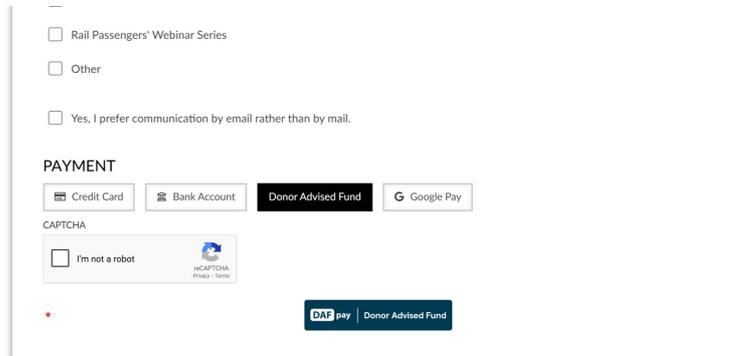


The screenshot shows a donation form with the following fields and options:

- Phone Number (not required) - Input field
- Email Address - Input field with a red asterisk indicating it is required
- Yes, I would like to receive email communications.
- PAYMENT** section with buttons for:
 - Credit Card
 - Bank Account
 - PayPal
 - Donor Advised Fund (highlighted in green)
 - Google Pay
 - DAF pay | Donor Advised Fund** (highlighted in blue)
- Dedicate this donation?

The background of the form is a photograph of a train at night.

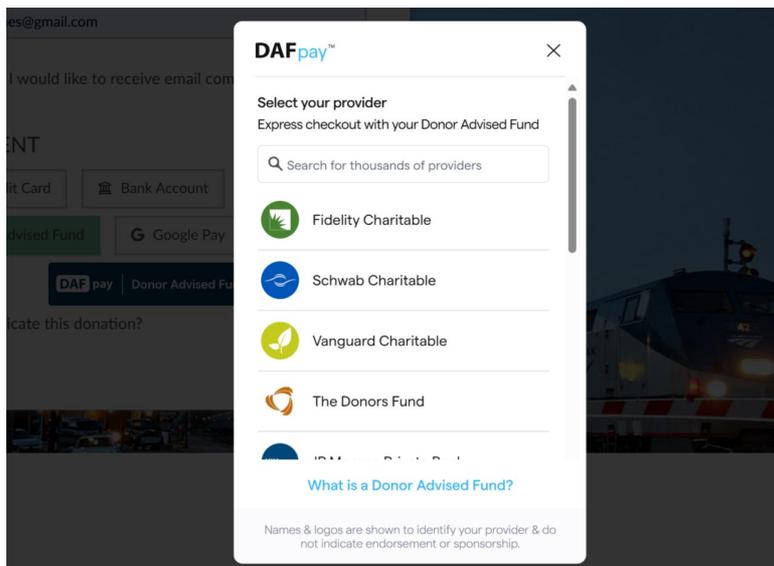
Membership Form:



The screenshot shows a membership form with the following fields and options:

- Rail Passengers' Webinar Series
- Other
- Yes, I prefer communication by email rather than by mail.
- PAYMENT** section with buttons for:
 - Credit Card
 - Bank Account
 - Donor Advised Fund** (highlighted in black)
 - Google Pay
- CAPTCHA** section with an "I'm not a robot" checkbox and a reCAPTCHA logo.
- DAF pay | Donor Advised Fund** button (highlighted in blue).

After selecting Donor Advised Fund as your payment preference, you will be taken to a DAFpay screen to select your donor advised fund provider, ie., Fidelity Charitable, Vanguard Charitable, Daffy, etc.



The screenshot shows the DAFpay provider selection screen. It features a search bar and a list of providers:

- Fidelity Charitable
- Schwab Charitable
- Vanguard Charitable
- The Donors Fund

At the bottom, there is a link for "What is a Donor Advised Fund?" and a disclaimer: "Names & logos are shown to identify your provider & do not indicate endorsement or sponsorship."

Select your provider, then follow their prompts. If you need to provide information on Rail Passengers Association, please use the below:

National Association of Railroad Passengers, Inc.
dba Rail Passengers Association
1200 G Street, NW
Suite 520
Washington, DC 20005
Contact: Jonsie Stone, jstone@narprail.org
Tax ID: 36-2615221

Member & Donor Notices

- **The Rail Passengers Association is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization. Our federal tax identification number is 36-2615221**
- **To help facilitate dissemination of electronic thank you receipts,** please make sure your contact information, **specifically your email address,** is up-to-date in your Neon profile.
- **If you need assistance with your membership,** please call the Office at 202-408-8362.
- **While our staff continues to work remotely, we are unable to provide permanent membership cards.** You can print a temporary membership card by creating an account at www.railpassengers.org (select "My Account" on the homepage).
- **Complete all information!** -- Before sealing your envelope, PLEASE double-check the credit card information on the buck slip!
 - Print credit card information clearly.
 - **Include an expiration date, month and year, as well as the CVV number.**
 - Without **COMPLETE** information, your membership renewal or donation can't be processed.
- **If you have your financial institution send a check on your behalf,** without a bucksliip, PLEASE instruct them to add:
 - a notation in the memo field if the payment is for membership dues or a donation, AND,
 - your Rail Passengers Association member ID. If we have multiple members with the same name, i.e., John Smith, it can be hard to identify the correct member to attribute the payment, without the member ID.



Rail Passengers Association members have access to a full service, nationwide federal credit union with extensive product and service offerings. Signature FCU is the exclusive provider of the [Rail Passengers Association-branded Visa credit card](#) with our logo, which supports our work by giving back to our organization, and gives you 1 point for every \$1 you spend to redeem for travel and merchandise. The card has no annual fee, no balance transfer fees, no foreign transaction fees, and has a very low interest rate.



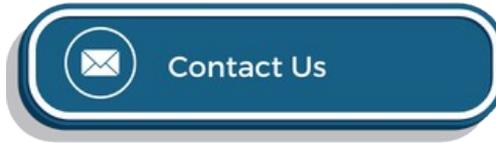
Rail Passengers Association Earns Coveted 4-Star Rating from Charity Navigator

Rail Passengers Association's strong financial health and commitment to accountability and transparency have earned it a 4-star rating from Charity Navigator, America's largest independent charity evaluator. Our Charity Navigator profile can be found by clicking [here](#).

THANK YOU TO OUR PARTNERS:



If you have questions, feedback, or submissions for next week's hotline, send us your thoughts! Help us spread the word about your local, regional, and national passenger rail wins.



RAIL PASSENGERS

EST. 1967

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