



Statement of
The Honorable Marc H. Morial
Mayor of New Orleans
On behalf of the United States Conference of Mayors
Before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and
Transportation
Hearing on the S. 1991 – The National Rail Defense Act
March 14, 2002

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, I am Marc H. Morial, Mayor of New Orleans.

I appear today on behalf of the United States Conference of Mayors where I serve as the organization's President. The Conference is a bipartisan organization that represents mayors of the more than 1,200 cities with a population of 30,000 or more.

Overview – A National Passenger Rail System

Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you and other Members of this Committee for holding this hearing today and as the spokesman for the nation's mayors, I cannot stress enough the importance of a secure and comprehensive national passenger rail system -- a national passenger rail system that touches communities across America from my city of New Orleans to the nation's capital and beyond.

Let me begin by emphasizing that the nation's mayors overwhelmingly believe that the time has come to increase our investment in our passenger rail infrastructure and build out the third leg of our transportation system. We see a powerful linkage between a strong Amtrak, a growing national inter-city passenger rail system, and the long-term viability of our local and metropolitan economies.

Mr. Chair and Members of this Committee, as the focal points of economic activity, cities are vital to the nation's economic development.

The U.S. Conference of Mayors Call For A National Rail Policy for the 21st Century

Mr. Chairman, the nation's mayors are not new to this discussion. On January 17, 2001, I led the U.S. Conference of Mayors in convening a National Rail Summit in Washington, DC as part of our 69th Winter Meeting. Over 300 mayors from around the country attended and called for a National Rail Policy for the 21st Century.

The nations mayors understood that in three decades of existence, Amtrak was never provided with a permanent, reliable and sufficient source of funding to ensure its ability to deliver the world-class service many other countries now take for granted.

Mr. Chairman and Committee Members, it astonishes people in New Orleans when they learn that less than 1% of all federal transportation spending has gone to passenger rail over the past 3 years. This year is no exception; the administration's budget request for Amtrak funding is \$521 million. The same budget includes nearly \$24 billion for highway, road and bridge construction projects and \$14 billion for aviation purposes. How can we expect Amtrak to offer a vital transportation service to other modes without providing it with comparable levels of funding?

Providing a national rail service is not privatizing the system.

The French national passenger rail system for example is clean, safe and has an ultra modern fleet of sleek trains run by state-owned companies. Often lost in the admiration of the European system is the breakdown of the British system. In the mid-1990s, Britain broke up the state-run system aiming for privatization and all the traps that are a part of that discussion including new investments and improved services.

It simply did not work. What Britain has today is a financially troubled company overseeing the tracks and private firms running money losing passenger lines that have a reputation for being dirty, expensive and unsafe.

Amtrak's Mission

We are requesting that our political leaders in Washington define whether Amtrak's mission is to provide an affordable national passenger rail service, including running certain politically popular but financially ill-advised long distance trains or is the mission to break even, perhaps even make a little profit. Mr. Chairman, my constituents and visitors to New Orleans need an affordable national passenger rail system.

New Orleans is a special events city. We routinely host national events including the NFL Super Bowl, Sugar Bowl, the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, and our world famous Mardi Gras. The success of these special events and related financial infusion into our local economy depends heavily on transportation choice and that includes Amtrak.

National Rail Defense Act

The mayors applaud Senator Hollings leadership on this issue of national urgency and support S. 1991, The National Rail Defense Act.

Mr. Chair and Members of this Committee, again, I want to convey the mayors strong support for S. 1991 and to urge your action on this priority legislation. We believe that the National Rail Defense Act is uniquely situated to ensure sufficient flows of public capital investment into the northeast corridor while guaranteeing defined budget allocations to our nationwide system of short and long distance routes.

Mr. Chairman, we also strongly support the priority given to the development and implementation of high-speed passenger rail corridors.

S. 1991 is a long-term plan to make passenger rail a part of our balanced transportation system. Mr. Chairman and Committee Members, the nations mayors feel strongly that the National Rail Defense Act will provide Amtrak the tools and funding needed to create a modern passenger system for all Americans to be proud of.

Closing Remarks

In closing, thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today to offer the perspectives of the nation's mayors on The National Rail Defense Act.

I would like to underscore that this is a very high priority concern for the mayors and other local elected officials and we will stand with you and this Committee as you examine ways to meet Amtrak's funding request of \$1.2 billion this year and development of a strategic vision and policy on a passenger rail system for the 21st Century – a national passenger rail system that will provide all Americans with transportation choice. The nations mayors firmly believe that The National Rail Defense Act is an important part of that vision.

As President of the Conference of Mayors, I can assure you that the nation's mayors will strongly support your efforts in this regard.