

U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

Subcommittee on Railroads, Pipelines and Hazardous Materials

“The Role of Intercity Passenger Rail During National Emergencies”

February 11, 2008

**Testimony of C. Ray Nagin
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To Chairwoman Brown, Ranking Member Shuster and other Members of the House Transportation and Infrastructure’s Subcommittee on Railroads, Pipelines and Hazardous Materials:

Thank you for choosing New Orleans as the site for your hearing on “The Role of Intercity Passenger Rail During National Emergencies.” We are particularly pleased to host you here at the Union Passenger Terminal (UPT). It is an historic building which currently plays an important intermodal role in our transportation network, and will play a critical role in future emergency evacuations.

As you are aware, Hurricane Katrina and the breaching of the federal levees left unprecedented damage in New Orleans and the region. Katrina produced the first mandatory evacuation in New Orleans history, and the largest displacement of people in U.S. history -- 1.3 million. But we know that access to more options for safely evacuating people without their own means of transportation might have greatly reduced the loss of human life following the storm and would have meant that fewer children, seniors and families would have had to experience the difficult conditions that followed Hurricane Katrina.

Union Passenger Terminal History

I would like to give you a little history about the building we are in. The Union Passenger Terminal has existed in New Orleans for more than 50 years. It opened in 1954 to consolidate passenger rail operations in one location and reduce the number of dangerous grade crossings throughout the heart of the city. The UPT was an ultramodern facility when it was built, and the beauty of the facility is re-emerging today as a result of the restoration work that is underway. It is also the site of a distinctive mural on the history of Louisiana done by the late Conrad Albrizio, a renowned artist and professor of art at Louisiana State University. These murals were recently restored by the New Orleans Building Corporation, a public benefit corporation charged with managing and developing under-used, deteriorated, or vacant City properties

The terminal escaped major damage following Hurricane Katrina. As one of few intact and centrally accessible city buildings, the UPT played an extraordinary role during the aftermath. It served as both the criminal justice center and the jail. Currently, the station is the major Southern hub for Amtrak which operates three trains (Sunset Limited, City of New Orleans and Crescent) from the city.

This facility has been greatly improved in the recent past, and will continue to undergo major renovations during the next five years. We appreciate the funds that the federal government has invested in planning and implementing important upgrades to the UPT. We are making plans for a track reconfiguration that will support evacuation and increase intercity rail capacity. Another grant is being used for making platforms, doors and restrooms ADA compliant and conducting other improvements. Our vision is to link this building with our historic streetcar lines as well, improving our famous and iconic public transit network.

The Recovery of New Orleans

Just as we are improving our transit system rather than simply rebuilding it, we also are working to build a better New Orleans. We have undergone an extensive recovery planning process and were the first municipality in Louisiana to have our plan approved by the Louisiana Recovery Authority. We have been creative in seeking financial resources since the storm and worked with the City Council to borrow more than \$45 million from various City departments to invest in the immediate recovery of our public safety facilities.

I have said before that 2008 will be the tipping point in our recovery. Although we know that we do not have all of the money we will need to fully restore our city and critical services, we now have the tools to accelerate our recovery. We have access to a state revolving loan fund, the initial portion of a \$260 million bond issue approved by voters before the storm, and some of our federal recovery dollars. In total, we have access to more than \$1 billion for our rebuilding efforts. Citizens and visitors will see unprecedented construction activity in the coming months. We plan more than \$363 million in road and street improvements alone.

This represents only projects that will be undertaken by City government and does not include other governmental entities, businesses or individuals. Since Hurricane Katrina, we have issued more than 81,000 building permits valued at more than \$5 billion. Experts predict we will see \$60 to \$100 billion in rebuilding activity during the next five to seven years.

Louis Armstrong International Airport also is rebounding. It currently provides 78 percent of seats offered pre-Katrina and 84 percent of pre-Katrina flights. Planes are departing for 88 percent of pre-Katrina locations.

Our port is now back to 2002 levels, above 2005. In addition, our sales tax collections are expected to reach 93 of pre-Katrina dollars. Employment is up in 14 out of 20 sectors.

We are seeing increased strength in our tourism industry. Our Mardi Gras celebration, which ended last week, was a major success. A total of 3.6 million people visited New Orleans in first six months of 2007. That is almost as many people as visited in all of 2006. Visitors are projected to spend \$4.5 billion in New Orleans this year. The record was set in 2004 at \$4.9 billion

But the most important measure of our recovery is the people, and our citizens are coming home. Today, the population of New Orleans is approximately 71 percent of pre-Katrina, or about 323,000 people. During the workday, the City's population increases to approximately 365,000, as people enter New Orleans for work and to conduct other business. People are investing in their neighborhoods, in their businesses and in the future of our City.

Evacuation Planning

We must be able to assure these citizens that we have the capacity to react quickly and responsibly in the event of another emergency. In order to be prepared for all situations, we must have a thorough plan for future evacuations, including preparation to help our neediest citizens. The use of rail for an evacuation is an ideal method of moving large numbers of individuals safely and rapidly while reducing the effects on a highway system that is certain to be overburdened.

After Hurricane Katrina, my Office of Homeland Security developed the City Assisted Evacuation Plan (CAEP), with a major component centered on rail service and the Union Passenger Terminal. Our strategy is to use the rail assets to move our elderly and those with minor medical conditions from the City. While there are many reasons for taking this approach, one of the most important is that rail cars provide a much higher level of comfort than bus transportation. If we are able to provide these vulnerable citizens with a more comfortable and reliable means of evacuation, we will increase their willingness to leave.

We were able to incorporate the use of railways into our evacuation plans during the past two hurricane seasons as a result of the cooperation of the federal government and various states. In 2006, our plan called for rail to take our citizens to Jackson, Mississippi, for further transportation to other shelter sites; under last year's plan, 6,000 citizens would have been evacuated to Memphis, Tennessee, where they would have been sheltered.

We strongly feel that the use of rail is critical to a successful future evacuation of the city of New Orleans. We are grateful for the roles the state and federal governments have played in providing these assets in the past, but obtaining these agreements was not easy, as I know Col. Terry Ebbert, our Director of Homeland Security, will discuss. We ask for your leadership in the use of rail for a tool in emergency evacuation.

We also ask you to support full funding for Amtrak service from coastal cities such as New Orleans. This would provide important regular passenger rail transportation and would play a critical role in emergency transportation planning and execution across the country. We would like to see the Amtrak Sunset Limited service that was available before the storm reactivated to take rail travelers east to Jacksonville, Florida. Not only is rail an energy efficient and comfortable mode of transportation, but maintenance of the track and car infrastructure for passenger rail is supportive of its use for emergency purposes. Finally, we seek \$80 million for rail fortification and start-up costs for a commuter rail line from New Orleans UPT to Baton Rouge, which would also be used for evacuation.

Conclusion

Madam Chair and Fellow Committee Members, I want to again thank you for your attention to this critical matter and for your dedication to our full recovery. We are making great strides, but our work will continue for several years. We still face critical challenges, but we are following through with the commitment I made that we would not only rebuild, but that we would rebuild better, stronger and smarter.

New Orleans is one of the most distinctive cities in this country. I look forward to working with you as we continue to restore this crown jewel and ensure the future safety of our citizens.

