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B.R., N.O. officials meet to plea for rail connection

By Penny Font

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Top economic development officials from New Orleans and Baton Rouge were at the State Capitol again Tuesday pleading their case for inter-city rail between the two cities.

At the meeting were GNO Inc. President & CEO Michael Hecht, Baton Rouge Area Chamber President & CEO Adam Knapp, Sen. Dan Claitor, representatives Michael Jackson and Hunter Green, Mayor Kip Holden, Transportation Secretary William Ankner, Jindal chief of staff Timmy Teepell, deputy chief of staff Stephen Waguespack and others. Paul Waidhas, an engineer with Burk-Kleinpeter, who is advising the DOTD on the matter, also attended.

GNO Inc. Chief of Staff Austin Marks declined to discuss the content of the meeting, other than to say the group still is “pursuing ways to see if there’s any possible way to make inter-city rail happen.”

Although some are upset that Jindal snubbed the meeting, Marks says the governor wasn’t expected to be in attendance. Claitor says that although no one indicated to him that Jindal was to attend, “I sensed that there were those that were upset that he wasn’t there.”

Working through the newly formed Super-Region Committee, GNO Inc. and BRAC have forged an unprecedented partnership, and passenger rail linking the two cities is one of their top priorities.

Marks says the group has written several letters to Jindal and Transportation Secretary William Ankner, asking them to rethink their decision to pull Louisiana from consideration for federal stimulus money to fund the project. They want the pair to reopen the state’s application to the U.S. Department of Transportation. Deadline for the application is Oct. 2.

However, their plea has apparently been largely ignored. “We haven’t really received any response from them on the best way to move forward,” Marks says. “We are working through that now.”

Claitor says he walked away with the impression that the administration gave the group “a polite no.” “My impression is that there were many of those who left the meeting with the ‘maybe next year’ sort of impression; that there were indications from the secretary that he wouldn’t be surprised if more money became available later for this project,” says Claitor, whose research indicates his district strongly supports the project. “The question mark for me was, will the later funds if ever be offered on the same basis, which is essentially all federal money this time? That’s my disappointment, I guess, that I don’t expect all federal money to be offered in the future; that it will very likely require a state match.”

Stirling Properties President/CEO Marty Mayer, who is president of GNO Inc. and serves on the SRC, has said he wants the business community to have the opportunity to get involved and explore solutions to the issue of operating funding.

“We have no progress to report on that at this time, but we are actively pursuing other ways to make it feasible,” Marks says. “The key for us now is to get the application in before the deadline. Where the money comes from has yet to be determined, but we do have several options that could be pursued. We’re hoping for the opportunity to do

so.”

The New Orleans-to-Baton Rouge line is expected to be part of a larger high-speed rail service along the Gulf Coast that will connect Houston to Atlanta. Construction of the proposed rail service project is estimated to cost \$300 million, with annual operating costs running about \$18 million.

Stops might include Acadian Thruway and the Mall of Louisiana in Baton Rouge, Gonzales, LaPlace, and, in New Orleans, the Louis Armstrong International Airport and the Amtrak station near the Superdome. Advocates say it could attract as many as 500,000 passengers a year.

Ankner withdrew Louisiana’s application from consideration two days after a national commentator mocked Jindal for applying for the funding, citing the governor’s criticism of using stimulus money for rail systems in his response to President Barack Obama’s first congressional address. Ankner has said he alone decided to withdraw the application after reviewing the requirements and determining “it didn’t make any sense for us to apply.”