

Keeping track of history
Marshall railroad support memo marks National Train Day

By [JIMMY ISAAC](#)

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MARSHALL — As government officials thanked Amtrak Passenger Services Superintendent Joy Smith on Saturday for her passenger rail support, she directed the Marshall Depot crowd to three young children clutching their father.

East Texas Council of Governments Director David Cleveland signed an agreement with lawmakers, rail advocates and residents from Arkansas, Louisiana and Texas with his kids at his side. The memorandum of understanding was in support of high-speed passenger rail service that would connect East Texas directly to the East Coast.

"When we talk about a reason for fighting, a reason for going on, they are the reason," said Smith, pointing to Cleveland's children. "They are our future."

Saturday's ceremony commemorated National Train Day, which celebrates the 139th anniversary of the joining of 1,776 miles of the Central Pacific and Union Pacific railways at Promontory Summit, Utah on May 10, 1869.

More than 60 patrons attended the memorandum-signing Saturday, including East Texas Corridor Council directors, Gregg County Judge Bill Stoudt, White Oak Mayor Tim Vaughn and aides from Louisiana's two U.S. senators, David Vitter and Mary Landrieu.

The Longview City Council recognized National Train Day with a proclamation read at Saturday's event.

Officials lauded Smith for her outspoken support of passenger rail expansion throughout the South. She said it was important to remember that leaders are on the right path to putting more efficient transportation in place for future generations as America grows with diversity and pressing transportation needs.

"To think that 139 years ago when those old farts came together, I don't think they thought that 139 years later, a 66-year-old African-American woman can be part of this historic day," said Smith, who is black. "Don't give up. This is a wonderful fight."

Officials have fought for several years to expand passenger rail in East Texas. Their latest cause has promoted high-speed passenger rail, a type of transport that operates at speeds of 90 mph and above by U.S. Federal Railroad Administration standards.

East Texas rail advocates like Longview activist Natalie Rabicoff want high-speed rail connecting East Texas to Dallas, Shreveport/Bossier City and Memphis via Texarkana.

Rabicoff, another signee of the memorandum, reminded East Texans of the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Grounded airplanes and limits on taxis and rental cars meant New Yorkers' basic transportation out of town was through passenger rail.

"I want to have a choice like (New Yorkers) did," Rabicoff said. "Just knowing the history of Hurricane Rita in Houston here in Texas, we should have learned that we cannot get into our cars like we're used to and drive to safety. We're spoiled."

Lack of funding could derail advocates' plans.

"It's going to take a sizable investment," Harrison County Judge Richard Anderson said. One mile of interstate highway costs about \$12 million to build, compared with about \$1.3 million to lay down one mile of the double-track needed for the service, he said, adding that high-speed rail lines from Longview to Shreveport would cost less than one clover-leaf freeway interchange in the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex.

"What high-speed rail would do is help us move traffic off the interstate system and start putting it on other forms of transportation," said Arkansas lawmaker Steve Haralson, who represents Texarkana and southwestern portions of the state. "Arkansas is at the cusp of falling behind Texas and Louisiana. It's time to step up and make this a priority."

The biggest step is securing funding for a project that can be achieved within 15 years or less, Anderson said.

Local leaders have gotten money for research. U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison secured a grant that provided \$455,000 in federal funds to the East Texas Corridor Council in February.

The Texas Department of Transportation will use that money to include passenger service in its state rail study, Anderson said.

Smith will be in Longview on May 29 with Amtrak Operations Director Richard Phelps to address Longview Partnership's Business Luncheon at Pinecrest Country Club. Reservations can be made at (903) 237-4000 until May 23.

"When you pull together, when you forget all of your little egos and pull together for the common good, we can do anything," said Smith, a 2000 Amtrak President's Safety and Service Award recipient. "I'm a firm believer that we are doing exactly what we're supposed to do at exactly the right time to do it."

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