

THE NEW ORLEANS RAIL GATEWAY PROGRAM MOVING FORWARD...

**NEW ORLEANS
RAIL GATEWAY PROGRAM**
AN ECONOMIC ENGINE FOR OUR COMMUNITY

The New Orleans Rail Gateway (NORG) is a critical link in the national and regional transportation system. The NORG serves freight rail traffic for six Class 1 railroads and passenger service for three Amtrak routes. Through the New Orleans Public Belt (NOPB) railroad, the Gateway connects the Port of New Orleans to the national rail network.

Numerous studies have been conducted by the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development (DOTD), the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), the New Orleans Regional Planning Commission (RPC) and the Class 1 railroads to identify ways to reduce rail congestion and highway crossing delays to improve rail service. These studies, dating back to 1975, are available on the DOTD website at <http://wwwsp.dotd.la.gov/Business/Projects/norg/Pages/default.aspx>.

The NORG is operating near capacity. On average, 35 freight and five passenger trains pass through the Gateway daily, with approximately 20 of those freight trains using the Back Belt through the Old Metairie neighborhood in Jefferson Parish. The 20 at-grade crossings along the Gateway each handle over 20 trains per day.

A 2007 Infrastructure Feasibility Assessment (2007 Study) identified two feasible alternatives to reduce delays and improve rail service; by either improving the existing Back Belt or creating and improving a new Middle Belt along the Earhart Expressway/I-10 Corridor.

In 2011 the DOTD and the FRA, in coordination with the NORPC, the Class 1 railroads, and Amtrak, began preparing an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the NORG Program, building upon the two feasible alternatives identified in the 2007 Study. Numerous meetings were held with federal and state agencies, local officials, business leaders, and neighborhood associations to introduce the study. Public meetings were last held in February 2012.

There was polarized public opinion to the feasible alternatives identified in the 2007 Study. The 2007 Study projected freight growth but held Amtrak passenger service constant at the current five trains daily while the 2011 Study reflected an increase in passenger service to 62 trains daily into the New Orleans Union Passenger Terminal (NOUPT) based on previously prepared passenger rail corridor planning studies and the State Rail Plan. This increased passenger service would most likely adversely affect the improvements being evaluated.

Recognizing these challenges, the DOTD and FRA had numerous discussions regarding the lack of public consensus, projected passenger train service and additional data needs. After much deliberation, it was decided that additional studies were warranted to re-evaluate both the passenger service projections and Gateway-wide improvements to the NORG.

DOTD and FRA have mutually agreed to temporarily suspend the current EIS study because there is currently insufficient federal and state funding to conduct the necessary comprehensive studies. When additional funding is secured, freight and passenger train forecasts will be reviewed, and possible alternatives discussed with local elected officials to gauge community support. Studies will continue when there is consensus.

State, Federal, and Local Sponsors



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In the meantime, DOTD and FRA will continue studying, as funding is secured, smaller individual projects that will provide public benefit and can be constructed independent of any other Gateway improvements. It is expected that the railroads will continue advancing some projects to improve rail operations.

The first smaller individual project being studied is combining and possibly grade separating the KCS and NOPB at-grade crossings of Jefferson Highway (US 90) in Jefferson Parish, between the Ochsner Health Foundation Hospital and Monticello Avenue.

JEFFERSON HIGHWAY RAIL CROSSING RELOCATION PROJECT

The Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development (DOTD) and the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), in coordination with the New Orleans Regional Planning Commission (RPC) and the railroads operating in the New Orleans metropolitan area are preparing an Environmental Assessment for improvements to the at-grade highway-rail crossings located along Jefferson Highway (US 90) in Jefferson Parish, between the Ochsner Health Foundation Hospital and Monticello Avenue.

Jefferson Highway (US 90) is classified as a Major Arterial and is part of the national highway network. It is also a key route for hurricane evacuation and is used by the police, fire and ambulances for delivery of emergency services. In 2018, an average of 25,000 vehicles per day travel this portion of Jefferson Highway. NORTA's Tulane (39) and Jefferson Transit's Jefferson Highway (E-3) bus routes also traverse this corridor. The corridor has limited opportunities for walking and bicycling.

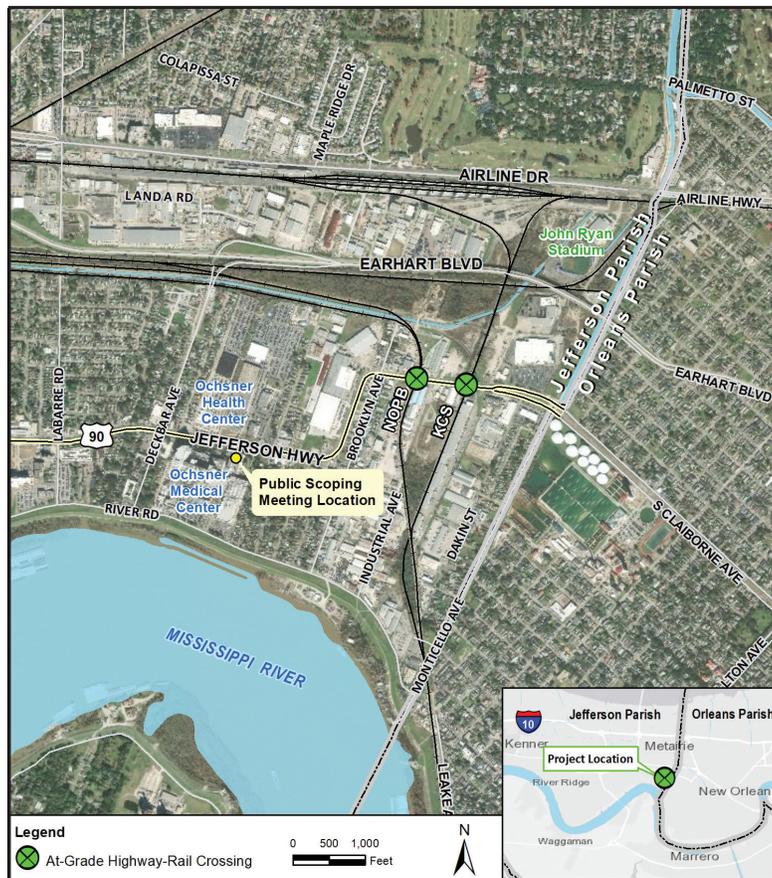


The Ochsner Health Foundation Hospital is undergoing a \$640 million redevelopment and expansion of their East Jefferson Campus on Jefferson Highway near the rail crossings. Construction will have a \$610 million local economic impact. Over a 10-year period, nearly 2,500 jobs will be created and will have a \$1.3 billion economic impact to businesses statewide. Transportation studies are underway by several agencies to address vehicular, transit, bicycle and pedestrian access to the expanded Ochsner Campus and envisioned growth to adjacent retail and residential housing. The Jefferson Highway Rail Crossing Relocation project will further improve area mobility.

Two at-grade highway-rail crossings, a New Orleans Public Belt Railroad (NOPB) crossing and a Kansas City Southern Railway (KCS) crossing are less than 700 feet apart between the hospital and Monticello Avenue. This study will evaluate combining these two crossings into a single crossing at either the NOPB or KCS crossing location. The study will also evaluate grade separating the combined crossing at these two locations with a roadway overpass. This project was recommended in a 2007 Infrastructure Feasibility Assessment (2007 Study) and identified as Projects N6 and N7 by the NORG Program. It was selected because of its strong public benefit.

The goals of combining and possibly grade separating these crossings could include:

- Improving safety by eliminating the hazard of one or both at-grade railway-highway crossings;
- Supporting the Ochsner Health Foundation Hospital expansion and regional economic development;
- Increasing economic competitiveness and improving air quality by reducing vehicle congestion;
- Decreasing cost of maintaining two separate at grade crossings;
- Increasing freight fluidity through the Gateway and Port of New Orleans.



STAY INFORMED

Public outreach is an integral part of the environmental process for the New Orleans Rail Gateway Program. The Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development and the Federal Railroad Administration, in coordination with the New Orleans Regional Planning Commission and the railroads operating in the New Orleans metropolitan area will host an open house public scoping meeting for the Jefferson Highway Rail Crossing Relocation Project.

Wednesday, March 4, 2020
 6:00 P.M. – 7:30 P.M.
 Ochsner Medical Center Campus
 Brent House Hotel, 2nd Floor, Caldwell Room
 1512 Jefferson Highway, New Orleans, LA 70121

Complimentary parking: Ochsner Medical Center Parking Garage, 2nd Floor and above.

The meeting notice will appear in local newspapers and be posted on the DOTD Project Web Page. You can be added to the contact list for this project by either attending the public scoping meeting or contacting the Project Team.

- **Information Line:** (504) 488-6196
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