

1 A bill to be entitled
2 An act relating to a rapid rail transit compact;
3 creating s. 351.41, F.S.; authorizing the Governor to
4 execute a rapid rail transit compact with specified
5 states, to join the Southern Rail Commission;
6 providing the form of the compact; providing an
7 effective date.
8

9 WHEREAS, North Florida has lacked passenger rail service
10 since September 2005, when track damage from Hurricane Katrina
11 led to the termination of Amtrak's Sunset Limited route, which
12 ran from New Orleans to Pensacola, Tallahassee, Jacksonville,
13 and Orlando, and

14 WHEREAS, the Southern Rail Commission (SRC), formed by the
15 United States Congress in 1982, has evolved over time with a
16 vision to "promote the safe, reliable, and efficient movement of
17 people and goods to enhance economic development along rail
18 corridors; provide transportation choices; and facilitate
19 emergency evacuation routes," and

20 WHEREAS, the States of Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi
21 are members of the SRC, and

22 WHEREAS, the SRC has been highly successful in
23 collaborating with Amtrak and other partners to obtain federal
24 funding for the restoration of passenger rail service in its
25 member states, including \$178 million in federal grant funding

26 | in September 2023 to restore passenger rail service from New
27 | Orleans, Louisiana, to Mobile, Alabama, and

28 | WHEREAS, the new route between New Orleans and Mobile,
29 | referred to as the "Mardi Gras service," is expected to be
30 | operational by the summer of 2025 and will run twice daily
31 | between New Orleans and Mobile, with stops in Bay St. Louis,
32 | Gulfport, Biloxi, and Pascagoula, Mississippi, and

33 | WHEREAS, the SRC has also identified a project connecting
34 | the entire Gulf Coast with services from Baton Rouge to Orlando,
35 | called the Gulf Coast Passenger Rail route, and

36 | WHEREAS, states such as Florida, which are contiguous to
37 | existing SRC member states, are eligible to become SRC members,
38 | and

39 | WHEREAS, by joining the SRC, Florida can leverage the power
40 | of a multistate coalition to study, plan, and obtain federal
41 | funding for passenger rail initiatives that benefit its
42 | residents and businesses, without obligating this state to spend
43 | state funds on rail infrastructure, and

44 | WHEREAS, passenger rail stimulates economic development by
45 | fostering tourism, attracting businesses, improving access to
46 | markets, promoting job creation, and spurring investment in
47 | local communities, and

48 | WHEREAS, passenger rail enhances connectivity between
49 | communities, businesses, military bases, health care facilities,
50 | educational institutions, sports venues, and tourist

51 attractions, fostering regional cooperation and cohesion among
 52 diverse populations, and

53 WHEREAS, passenger rail can expand this state's capacity
 54 for emergency evacuation and disaster response during
 55 emergencies and provide another option for mobilizing emergency
 56 response personnel, particularly when roadways have reached
 57 capacity or have been damaged, and

58 WHEREAS, passenger rail provides an alternative mode of
 59 transportation, reducing traffic congestion on highways by
 60 alleviating the strain on existing road infrastructure, which
 61 increases safety and efficiency for all travelers, and

62 WHEREAS, accessible and convenient transportation options
 63 increase quality of life for residents by providing greater
 64 mobility, reducing travel times, and offering an alternative to
 65 driving, NOW, THEREFORE,

66

67 Be It Enacted by the Legislature of the State of Florida:

68

69 **Section 1. Section 351.41, Florida Statutes, is created to**
 70 **read:**

71 351.41 Rapid Rail Transit Compact.—The Governor, on behalf
 72 of this state, is hereby authorized to execute a compact, in
 73 substantially the following form, with the States of Alabama,
 74 Louisiana, and Mississippi, and the Legislature hereby signifies
 75 in advance its approval and ratification of such compact:

76
77 RAPID RAIL TRANSIT COMPACT

78 ARTICLE I

79 The purpose of this compact is to study the feasibility of
80 rapid rail transit service between the states of Alabama,
81 Florida, Louisiana, and Mississippi and to establish a joint
82 interstate commission to assist in this effort.

83
84 ARTICLE II

85 This compact shall become effective immediately as to the
86 states ratifying it whenever the states of Alabama, Florida,
87 Louisiana, and Mississippi have ratified it and Congress has
88 given consent thereto. Any state not mentioned in this article
89 which is contiguous with any member state may become a party to
90 this compact, subject to approval by the legislature of each of
91 the member states.

92
93 ARTICLE III

94 The states which are parties to this compact, hereinafter
95 referred to as party states, do hereby establish and create a
96 joint agency which shall be known as the Southern Rail
97 Commission, hereinafter referred to as the commission, or any
98 successor name adopted by all members of the commission. The
99 membership of such commission shall consist of the Governor of
100 each party state, one representative each from the Mississippi

101 Energy and Transportation Board, or its successor, the Office of
102 Aviation and Public Transportation of the Louisiana Department
103 of Transportation and Development, or its successor, the Alabama
104 Department of Energy, or its successor, and the Florida
105 Department of Transportation, or its successor, and five other
106 citizens of each party state, to be appointed by the Governor
107 thereof. The appointed members of the commission shall serve for
108 terms of 4 years each. Vacancies on the commission shall be
109 filled by appointment by the Governor for the unexpired portion
110 of the term. The members of the commission shall not be
111 compensated for service on the commission, but each of the
112 appointed members shall be entitled to actual and reasonable
113 expenses incurred in attending meetings, or incurred otherwise
114 in the performance of his or her duties as a member of the
115 commission. The members of the commission shall hold regular
116 quarterly meetings and such special meetings as its business may
117 require. They shall choose annually a chairman and vice chairman
118 from among their members, and the chairmanship shall rotate each
119 year among the party states in order of their acceptance of this
120 compact. The commission shall adopt rules and regulations for
121 the transaction of its business and a record shall be kept of
122 all its business. It shall be the duty of the commission to
123 study the feasibility of providing interstate rapid rail transit
124 service between the party states. Toward this end, the
125 commission shall have power to hold hearings; to conduct studies

126 and surveys of all problems, benefits, and other matters
 127 associated with such service, and to make reports thereon; to
 128 acquire, by gift, grant, or otherwise, from local, state,
 129 federal, or private sources, such money or property as may be
 130 provided for the proper performance of its functions, and to
 131 hold and dispose of same; to cooperate with other public or
 132 private groups, whether local, state, regional, or national,
 133 having an interest in such service; to formulate and execute
 134 plans and policies for emphasizing the purpose of this compact
 135 before the Congress of the United States and other appropriate
 136 officers and agencies of the United States; and to exercise such
 137 other powers as may be appropriate to enable it to accomplish
 138 its functions and duties and to carry out the purposes of this
 139 compact.

141 ARTICLE IV

142 Each party state agrees that its Legislature may, in its
 143 discretion, from time to time make available and pay over to the
 144 commission funds for the establishment and operation of the
 145 commission. The contribution of each party state shall be in
 146 equal amounts, if possible, but nothing in this article shall be
 147 construed as binding the Legislature of any state to make an
 148 appropriation of a set amount of funds at any particular time.

150 ARTICLE V

151 Nothing in this compact shall be construed so as to
152 conflict with any existing statute, or to limit the powers of
153 any party state, or to repeal or prevent legislation, or to
154 affect any existing or future cooperative arrangement or
155 relationship between any federal agency and a party state.

156
157 ARTICLE VI

158 (1) This compact shall continue in force and remain
159 binding upon each party state until the Legislature or Governor
160 of each or any state takes action to withdraw therefrom.
161 However, any such withdrawal does not become effective until 6
162 months after the date of the action taken by the Legislature or
163 Governor. Notice of such action shall be given to the other
164 party state or states by the Secretary of State of the party
165 state which takes such action.

166 (2) There is hereby granted to the Governor, to the
167 members of the commission for Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, and
168 Mississippi, and to the compact administrator all the powers
169 provided for in the compact and in this section. All officers of
170 this state are hereby authorized and directed to do all things
171 falling within their respective jurisdictions which are
172 necessary or incidental to carrying out the purpose of the
173 compact.

174 **Section 2.** This act shall take effect July 1, 2025.