

Testimony of John E. Bertini, Jr., MD, FACS (Chairman Board of Directors, Galveston Island Railroad Museum & Terminal) before the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure's Subcommittee on Railroads, Pipelines, and Hazardous Materials regarding "The Role of Intercity Passenger Rail During National Emergencies" on Monday 11 February 2008 at 10:00 AM in the New Orleans Union Passenger Terminal 1001 Loyola Avenue, New Orleans, Louisiana

Congresswoman Brown, thank you for the invitation to appear before your subcommittee. I am John Bertini. On Thursday morning September 22nd 2005 I received an early morning call from Ms. Joy Smith, an official of Amtrak, asking if I would organize and assist in the loading of trains departing from Houston's Amtrak station taking evacuees out of Hurricane Rita's projected path. Amtrak had dispatched a four passenger car and one dining car train to Houston to evacuate people who had fled Hurricane Katrina less than a month before and were still sheltered in Houston. I provisioned the train with food and water, loaded several hundred people in 20 minutes and sent them on their way on a rapid trip to San Antonio where they received care and shelter.

Just after the Amtrak train departed to the west, a Burlington Northern Santa Fe and Trinity Rail Express commuter double decked train arrived to take another several hundred people, many with disability and infirmity, rapidly to Dallas with a intermediate stop for a meal. These people, their belongings, medical equipment and supplies, were rapidly boarded with order and calm.

I know firsthand the power and problems of passenger rail evacuation. The potential far out weights the impediments obstructing the development a feasible rail passenger disaster evacuation plan for our Gulf Coast and the nation in response to either natural or manmade disasters.

The major problems are a lack of a comprehensive plan involving the Homeland Security Agency, Amtrak, the Class 1 railroad companies, state and local officials. Such a plan would need to provide the equipment, logistics of rapid response, the mustering of select evacuees and the care of these people as they travel to the destination point with provision for their return. There are practical problems of freight traffic volume, lack of railcars, care of the elderly and infirm, rail infrastructure limitations and staff training that would all yield to coordinated planning and practice exercising.

The potential of the passenger rail to move many of those who are residing within institutions such as health care facilities or have restricted mobility either because of age or disability or those who lack access to private transportation is unmatched by forms of transportation crippled on the crowded evacuation roads. People can be cared for and feed while rapidly fleeing danger under the care of a small number of crew. The response to resource ratio can be quite favorable, provided the evacuation plan is well constructed by those who understand both railroads and disaster planning.

Thank you.