



# BLET Auxiliary News

Working to bring about safer working conditions for Locomotive Engineers & Trainmen, educate spouses, and enhance the lifestyles of railroad employees and their families.

Volume 11, Number 3

Autumn 2020

Kathleen Bisbikis, President • Jodi Lynn Wallace, 1st Vice President • Lawana Poss, Secretary • Terri Fleming, Treasurer  
Jessica Cole, 2nd Vice President/National Legislative Representative • [www.bletauxiliary.net](http://www.bletauxiliary.net)

**Join in the fun - you can't win if you don't play!**



**Traeger Raffle Winners  
Taylor and Bradley McCain**



They say "you can't win if you don't play." Taylor McCain took a chance when she purchased four tickets for the Traeger BBQ raffle from her new neighbor Rachel Pharris, a member of the Springfield, Missouri Auxiliary. Taylor and her family had just relocated from California to Missouri.

National Secretary Lawana Poss said Taylor and her husband Bradley could not have been more excited when they learned their ticket had been drawn and they were the big winners. Who can

**YETI 125 TUNDRA COOLER**

# RAFFLE

**DECEMBER 5, 2020**

**TICKETS \$5.00 EACH**

*The perfect Christmas gift!!!*

YETI Tundra® 125 is your go-to ice chest. Built from virtually indestructible rotomolded polyethylene with up to three inches of PermaFrost™ Insulation in the walls and lid, it's your best bet for keeping ice on longer journeys, whether that's offshore fishing trips or remote hunting excursions. It's a bear-resistant beast of a cooler that can face off with Mother Nature and live to tell the tale.

[WWW.BLETAUXILIARY.NET](http://WWW.BLETAUXILIARY.NET)

blame them? The Traeger 575 Pro Series Grill is beautiful, and I am sure it will provide many great meals and memories for the McCain family. Thank you to everyone who purchased tickets for our Traeger summer raffle event.

We are excited now to have a Tundra 125 ice chest for our next fundraiser raffle. The drawing will be held on December 5 via Facebook Live, giving the winner plenty of time to wrap it up and put it under the tree for someone special. Log on to our website at [www.bletauxiliary.net](http://www.bletauxiliary.net) now to purchase your tickets!

# From the President

BY KATHLEEN BISBIKIS

*“Fight for the things that you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you.”*

- Ruth Bader Ginsberg

Greetings,

I could never have guessed that we would still be in a state of quarantine this late into 2020 as we prepare the newsletter’s Autumn issue. I felt sure our children would have been back in school by now and that some resemblance of normal would have come back. However, it seems that Zoom meetings, virtual schools, and masks in public are the new normal.

The Auxiliary officers were disappointed that the BLET regional meetings were cancelled and we were unable to see everyone. We are, however, very grateful for the support we received from our members, our communities, and the families of all railroaders and their divisions when we held our Traeger Grill raffle, which was originally intended to be featured at the summer meetings. In a time when we had no idea how we were going to do our usual fundraising that takes place at the regional meetings, you all came to our rescue, and we cannot express enough appreciation. You can meet our lucky grill winner on the cover story and find out about our next exciting fundraiser raffle for an item that we think would make someone a genuinely lovely Christmas gift.

I’m saddened to have to share with everyone that our 1st Vice President, Jodi Wallace, had to make the hard decision to step down from her position as a national officer. Jodi has done a fantastic job over the last two years, and

I have appreciated her enthusiasm and willingness to do whatever was needed any time I reached out to her. Thankfully, we are blessed with Rachel Pharris in Springfield, Missouri, who has agreed to step up and finish the two years left in Jodi’s term. Rachel is an innovator and a go-getter, and we are certain that she will bring much energy and many new ideas to the Auxiliary. We are very excited to welcome her onto our team.

Lastly, please let me remind everyone of the importance of using your voice this November. Look into state laws governing early voting in your area to avoid crowds and make sure you cast your ballot with the least amount of exposure to long lines and waiting periods. Currently, 39 states have early voting available, either in person or by mail. If you are voting by mail, read your ballot carefully and make sure you follow all instructions when filling it out. Take time to do it correctly, paying particular attention to the outer envelope, which can often be an invitation for legal challenges if signatures or other information is illegible or missing. Also, keep in mind that those candidates who do not support labor are not supporters of your job. Vote as if your job depends on it because, more than ever in this election, it does.



*Kathleen “Kat” Bisbikis  
National President, BLET Auxiliary  
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Valley Springs, California 95252  
209-786-7367*



## **Railroad Retirement Board Representative Paula Mills visits Northeastern Oregon to help educate BLET, SMART-TD, and BLET Auxiliary Members about retirement benefits**



*By William Wallace, First Vice Chairman, UP Western Lines, and Member, Auxiliary No. 362*

In March of this year, Eastern Oregon Auxiliary 362, LaGrande, Oregon, along with both the BLET and SMART TD local divisions in the area, hosted an informational meeting with Railroad Retirement Board (RRB) Representative Paula Mills.

Mrs. Mills attended both local division meetings in the area and was available at the depot after the meetings to answer members' questions concerning railroad retirement.

During our auxiliary meeting, Mrs. Mills gave a presentation concerning the state of the Railroad Retirement Board and provided us with a wealth of information about preparing for retirement and what documentation the RRB needs from the employees and spouses. She also shared information about the "current connection with the railroad" and what happens if that is broken, and took the time to verify birth certificates and marriage certificates for members and their spouses and scan them into her computer.



I personally learned much from this informational meeting, and I recommend to all of our local auxiliaries that you reach out to the local divisions in your area and the RRB to arrange to have an RRB representative attend your meetings. Not only does it allow people to learn more about your local auxiliary, but it gets the spouses and family members in contact with the RRB so they can get accurate answers to any questions they may have.

## **Twin Ports Auxiliary 6388 – Unstoppable!**

*By Rose Surchik, President, Auxiliary 6388, Duluth-Superior, Minnesota*

Although we have been unable to have in-person meetings in recent months due to the pandemic, we have been busy helping out our fellow brothers and sisters! We donated funds to a railroad family-owned homeless shelter and have made monthly donations to the local food pantry. We also made donations to and helped promote two GoFundMe pages in the month of August for two of our BLET Div. 188 members. One was to raise funds for the family of Brother Matt Bryant, who lost their home in a tragic house fire, and the other was for BLET Brother Dustin Davey, who is undergoing treatment for brain cancer. We are pleased to report that both of these fundraisers exceeded the goals set on the GoFundMe pages. Many thanks to all who gave so generously. We continue to support all of our workers on the "front lines," and have been donating food or gas cards to those in need during these hard times.

Division 163 in Proctor, Minnesota, made a generous donation to the National Auxiliary to help with their fundraising efforts this year, which were drastically curtailed due to the cancellation of

both regional meetings. Tom Moder, Legislative Rep for Division 163 and a member of our auxiliary, also made a donation to the National Auxiliary and is working to recruit engineers in the area to join our local auxiliary as associate members.

We have been holding our monthly meetings via Zoom and will continue to do so until all of our members feel safe enough to meet in person. Thank you all for your continued support and understanding.

*Editor's Note: The members and associate members of Twin Ports Auxiliary 6388 are the spouses, family members, and members of BLET Division 188, in Superior, Wisconsin, and BLET Division 163 in Proctor, Minnesota, and others in the community who are interested in the work that they do. The auxiliary was organized on August 30, 2015, in Proctor, Minnesota. Founding member and President of Aux. 6388, Rose Surchik, was elected to serve as Alternate National Secretary at the National Convention in October 2018.*

# NATIONAL TREASURER POSITION *Responsibilities & Rewards*

By Terri Fleming, National Treasurer



I had the opportunity to take over the BLET National Auxiliary Treasury when I ran for the position of National Treasurer in 2014. I have found this work to be fulfilling, yet sometimes challenging. I have been doing bookkeeping for other organizations for many, many years, and I have found that each job is very unique.

Basically, the duty of the National Treasurer is to maintain the books of the Auxiliary. Sounds simple, eh? Well, this includes numerous responsibilities, such as processing payroll, paying payroll taxes, processing IRS documents, and paying any acquired bills. I balance all accounts and report the financial situation to the Executive Council. I also process and distribute the awards to our scholarship recipients, a task that I find very rewarding. It is such a great feeling to have the young adults taking on the world and we are helping them to accomplish their goals. Another very rewarding part of my job is to send the monthly stipends to the deserving

recipients of our Care and Assistance Program (CAP).

The National Auxiliary is a tax-exempt nonprofit organization and is thereby required to file an IRS Form 990 each year. This form allows the IRS and the general public to evaluate a nonprofit's operations. It includes information on the nonprofit's mission, programs, and finances. In addition to preparing and filing the annual Form 990 and responding to any questions from the IRS, I also maintain the Auxiliary's "990 status," which states that the local auxiliaries fall under the "umbrella" of the National Auxiliary and are not required to file annual tax returns. It is my responsibility to set up each newly formed local auxiliary with their Employer Identification Number (EIN), which is needed for their banking purposes.

The National Treasurer serves as a member of the National Auxiliary Executive Council. It has been a true blessing working with and getting to know the other members of the Executive Council. I have developed lasting friendships with this group of very dedicated and hard-working women. The Council meets annually and I find it to be an uplifting experience each time we get together to share the enthusiasm,

as well as the frustrations, of the Auxiliary. We work together as a team to brainstorm new ideas and work on solutions for any problems that may arise.

Our organization has made many achievements over the years in supporting and educating our members and their families, as well as in the legislative arena. We continue to support the efforts of the BLET, each other, and most importantly, our spouses. No one understands the life of a railroad family better than another railroad spouse and family. We constantly strive to support our organization and to educate and offer assistance to our younger members. Whether you are member of a local auxiliary or a member-at-large, please know that you are very important to us.

At the next National Convention of the BLET Auxiliary, which will take place in 2022, my term for this office will expire. If you have bookkeeping skills and are interested in running for the office of National Treasurer at the next convention, please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns you may have. The position of National Treasurer is an important one with many responsibilities, and it is also very rewarding in so many ways.

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## Attack on the Postal Service

By Becky Schneider, National 3rd Vice President/Assistant National Legislative Representative

As we all know, problems with the postal service have existed for a long time, but they have now been exacerbated by the pandemic and by the current administration. My personal experience over the last two months has proven the mail is indeed slow. It took 11 days for a small package to get from Georgia to El Paso, Texas. It is not an intentional slow down, merely collateral damage from no overtime and ordering trucks to leave distribution centers before all of the mail is sorted, resulting in backups that increase daily. A community mailbox key that previously took a week to obtain now takes two to four weeks because the crew that processes those was cut back, and a simple change of address takes seven to ten days

to become effective. The Congressional requirement in 2006 demanding it prefund its pension fund has left the Post Office in financial trouble ever since.



The President has made no bones about his intentions. He believes mail-in ballots are ripe with fraud despite the fact that he votes by mail-in ballot. And he also acknowledges that if he starves out the Post Office, he will cripple their ability to get ballots returned in a

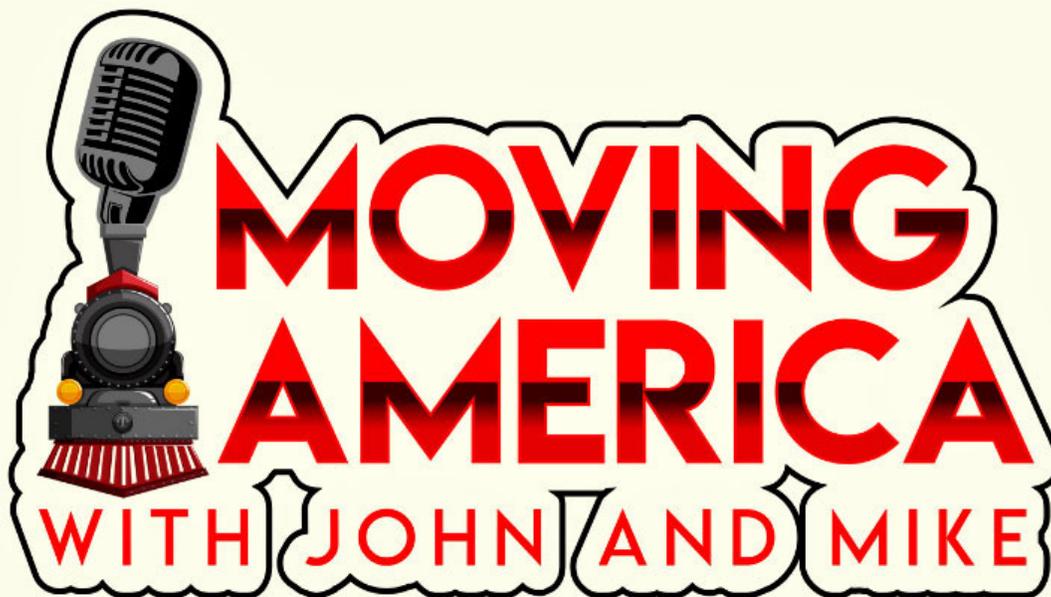
## Attack on the Postal Service, continued

timely manner. His new henchman, Louis DeJoy, the newly appointed Postmaster General is the first such Postmaster in 20 years who does not have a postal background. In addition to being a megadonor, he has significant investments in companies that compete with the Post Office. So far, he has eliminated overtime for hundreds of thousands of employees and mandated that mail be kept until the following day if distribution centers are running behind. He claims his policies will result in \$200 million in cost savings while others have said the savings will be minimal and will be at the cost of universal service. He has removed or reassigned almost 24 agency leaders, including the top executives who oversaw day-to-day operations. It has been reported that some mail sorting machines from facilities around the country have been removed without explanation. These are the same machines that would be used to sort ballots for the upcoming election. In addition, mail drop boxes in communities around the country are

simply disappearing. Despite calls for DeJoy's resignation, threats of Congressional investigation, and an investigation launched by the Postal Service Inspector General, he has instead pledged even more sweeping changes.

This is a blatant act by the President to hinder the voting rights of Americans. He has now said it numerous times, so it's not fake news. Besides disrupting delivery of mail, medications, and important information, he has now put his shiv to another American institution – an institution established by the Constitution. Please support your union brothers and sisters and call your Congressional representatives and senators to demand they support the Delivering America Act prohibiting the USPS from changing its operations or levels of service until the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, reverting to whatever structures were in place as of January 1, 2020, and to allow money already funded through the CARES Act to be used by the Post Office.

*Sources: USA Today and Washington Post*



Moving America is a railroad podcast hosted by two locomotive engineers and BLET Local Chairmen, John Belcher (Div. 73) and Mike Necessary (Div. 37).

Their podcast covers various topics including industry news, personal stories from their many years of experience, and questions submitted by listeners.

The podcast can be found on various platforms including: Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Spotify, and several others. You can find Moving America Podcast on Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit as Moving America Podcast.

You can also reach them via email at [MovingAmericaPodcast@outlook.com](mailto:MovingAmericaPodcast@outlook.com)



FROM JESSICA COLE, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE REPRESENTATIVE

## Issues Combined in a Safety and Infrastructure Bill that has PASSED the House!

H.R.2, better known as The Moving Forward Act, is a \$1.5 trillion, 2300-page-long proposal that hopes to touch virtually every American's life for the better. It covers everything from the roads we drive on, to enhancing the U.S. Electric Grid, to better support electric vehicles, to changes in how rural communities get internet service, and it provides support for schools and child care, just to name a handful of its ambitious goals.

According to BLET President Dennis Pierce, H.R.2 also represents the most important rail safety legislation in more than a decade by combining many of the stand-alone bills the BLET has fought for since 2008.

The umbrella of The Moving Forward Act would provide for:

- Two-person train crews
- Increased Amtrak funding
- Fatigue mitigation
- Regulation of unsafe train lengths, including impact on blocked crossings
- Safety culture assessments
- Protecting American Rail Jobs at the U.S.-Mexico border
- Crew member assault prevention

"The Moving Forward Act contains rail safety provisions that will benefit all railroaders, including BLET members and their families," President Pierce said: "The favorable vote in the Democrat-controlled U.S. House of Representatives is a direct result of the lobbying by BLET officers and members alongside all of Rail Labor. It is clear from the vote that mobilized and united union members can make a difference. While the vote represents a victory for the safety and job security of American rail workers, the true test of support for rail workers will come as the legislation moves

into the Republican-controlled U.S. Senate. BLET's membership must be prepared to lobby even harder to get this legislation over the finish line."

The Moving Forward Act includes a \$500 billion transportation bill, the Investing in a New Vision for the Environment and Surface Transportation in America Act (INVEST in America Act), which was introduced on June 3, 2020, and approved by the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee on June 18. It was then rolled into the gigantic bill, H.R.2, and approved as part of that bill by the House of Representatives by a vote of 233 to 188 on July 2, 2020.

Among specific bill provisions are a mandate for a minimum crew size of two (a certified engineer and a certified conductor) and tripled funding for Amtrak. The bill would also challenge the Precision Schedule Railroad (PSR) operating model promoted by the Class I Freight Rail Industry.

Further, the bill would reform the Federal Railroad Administration's process for non-emergency waivers of safety regulations and would protect BLET jobs by ensuring that only U.S. citizens and nationals be allowed to operate trains originating in Mexico and travelling into the United States. Currently Mexican crews are permitted to run 10 miles past the border into the United States, but U.S. crews are not permitted to run past the border into Mexico.

While House passage of this bill is very good news, it's a long way from the finish line of becoming law, and a lot of work lies ahead for the companion bill being considered by the Senate. Much difficulty potentially lies ahead in the Senate, as President Trump and the Republican-led Senate have already expressed misgivings about the Democratic designed Moving Forward Act.

Both chambers and both parties are under pressure to reach a passable agreement soon, because the current infrastructure legislation — the FAST Act — is set to expire at midnight on September 30.

President Pierce reminds us, "It is clear what can be done legislatively to improve and protect Rail jobs when we elect labor-friendly candidates. We will all have an opportunity in the fall elections to support those candidates who support our issues." *Sources: Multiple, including Forbes.com; Freight Waves; and ble-t.org Daily Headlines*

## Pandemic Effects on Shipments

Does anyone else feel like they're riding a Pandemic Yo-Yo? In March and part of April, my husband was never home more than long enough to get his hours of rest, and then he was right back out as fast as they could call him back. I am sure it was the same for most everyone reading this article. The COVID-19 Pandemic and the associated shutdowns in most states created voracious demand for all manner of supplies that ship by rail.

There was simply not enough available manpower to keep up, and rather than call back some of the many furloughed engineers and trainmen, the carriers addressed the situation by petitioning the FRA for waivers of more than 80 regulations so that they could run their existing workforce even harder.

Now, a couple of months later, everything is much different.

It was a shock to me that my husband, who has more than two decades of seniority, suddenly found himself unable to hold a job in the yard that has been his stable home base for more than ten years. He has had to move to a yard that is easily a 90-minute drive from our home in order to have a holdable position because boards have been slashed by more than 50% in his home yard due to shipment slowdowns.

A recent article by David Nahass in Railway Age, "Recovery, Growth, Car Supply Confront Rail" explains the situation and the uncertainty quite well.

A June 17 Webcast by Railway Age Rail Insights (held in place of the

usual Chicago in-person conference due to the pandemic) exposed the unpredictability of rail loadings during and after the pandemic. Many analysts are hoping we've seen the bottom, but no one is really sure, and additional foginess remains as to what a recovery will look like.

Majority opinion among analysts suggests that there is reason to hope for a quick return, but many questions remain. When will the recovery happen? What does industry growth look like moving forward? Will post-pandemic car supply play a role?

A significant near-term perspective was offered by Jack Hellmann, the CEO of short line operator Genesee & Wyoming (G&W). Speaking on the subject of loadings, Hellmann said, "Some railroads are up, and some railroads are down . . . . If you're moving a lot of frac sand, you're probably moving a lot less of it today. If you're moving pulp (G&W moves pulp, which is up 8%, on the Chattahoochee Industrial Railroad for use in paper towels, facial tissues and toilet paper) and paper linerboard (up 5%) for e-commerce, in general you're probably moving a lot more."

At the low point so far, around Week 20, weekly Class I loadings dipped as low as 30% less from the previous year, but they have returned significantly and now sit at about 14% total decrease year over year through Week 25 of this year.

Hellmann feels that a gradual U-shaped recovery is more likely than a quick V-shaped recovery. Hellmann stated that his company is working to manage what it can, but plans to remain flexible and prepared for anything that doesn't follow their predictions, including the unknowable impact of a second COVID-19 wave, and associated shutdowns and backlogs.

A second panelist, Pat Ottensmeyer, President and CEO of Kansas City Southern, closed out Rail Insights with a continental perspective. Ottensmeyer has played a key advisory role in USMCA (U.S.-Mexico-

Canada Agreement), and this gives him a unique viewpoint as to how the new trade agreement can impact potential rail loadings growth.

Kansas City Southern is seeing “sequential carload growth for the past several weeks that has been much more rapid and includes our train start and crew start growth,” said Ottensmeyer. Additionally, Kansas City Southern was able to use its pandemic downturn to create new efficiency gains and cost savings, and those are being maintained even as volume picks up, with automotive loadings as a segment that is trending upward in loading volume.

A third major factor, which was not directly covered at Rail Insights, is car supply. A major question is where car supply is headed. A gently sloped, slow, U-shaped recovery implies downward pressure on the market, new car prices and lease rates, delivery, and total demand. One analyst has suggested that the rail industry would be better off not building a single new car for the next two to three years. One third of the national rail car fleet now sits in storage, and it seems unlikely that demand will outpace supply of available cars any time soon.

Large storage numbers have hit the rail industry in cycles many times before, but the difference in the COVID-19 pandemic is that high storage numbers are hitting carriers across all market segments instead of just a few at a time.

Ottensmeyer says that as loadings growth increases, rail carriers expect to handle the same or increasing loads with fewer cars through, among other things, Precision Scheduled Railroad-ing. The joker in the deck is to guess what percentage of returning loadings will require increases in available equipment.

As well, new proposals to allow longer, heavier trucks on U.S. Highways pose a threat to demand for shipment by rail. *Sources: Railway Age and Freightwaves*

**Sick and Unemployed Railroaders May Get Some Relief**  
Rail unions join forces to end RUIA sequestration.

INDEPENDENCE, Ohio, June 12 — All U.S. railroad labor unions have united in a campaign to overturn the unfair sequestration of Railroad Unemployment Insurance Act (RUIA) benefits, which unjustly reduces the unemployment and sickness benefits of railroad workers. The unions are represented by the Teamsters Rail Conference and the AFL-CIO’s Transportation Trades Department (TTD).

On June 11, the unions contacted Ohio Senators Rob Portman and Sherrod Brown and requested that they jointly co-sponsor language consistent with the HEROES Act (H.R. 6800) that would eliminate sequestration. Specifically, the unions are asking the Senators to rescind the sequestration of RUIA benefits by amending the Balanced Budget and Emergency Deficit Control Act of 1985 to include RUIA among the other various programs that are not subject to sequestration. Senator Portman is chairman of the Senate subcommittee where a decision on sequestration will be made.

According to Teamsters Rail Conference President Dennis R. Pierce and TTD President Larry Willis, “Unlike the average U.S. worker, railroad employees do not receive unemployment benefits through state-administered unemployment insurance programs. Instead, unemployed railroaders receive these benefits through the RUIA program, which is administered by the United States Railroad Retirement Board (RRB). As a result of the Budget Control Act of 2011, RUIA [benefits] are subject to sequestration. No state unemployment insurance benefits in the country are subject to this unfair treatment.”

As background, unemployment and sickness benefits payable under the RUIA have been sequestered or reduced since 2013, as part of a package of automatic spending cuts required by the Budget Control Act of 2011 (BCA), which was passed in August 2011. Currently, RUIA unemployment benefits are being sequestered at the rate of 5.9%, as are RUIA sickness benefits. In the past, these rates have been adjusted annually when the federal sequestration is recalculated. Railroaders have seen their benefits sequestered as high as 9.2% in the past.

As part of the push to end sequestration, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) will launch a mobilization effort in the state of Ohio to urge Senators Portman and Brown to co-sponsor legislation to ease the burden upon sick and unemployed railroaders by overturning sequestration.

“In these uncertain times, our members who are either laid-off or sick deserve the same fair treatment as all other workers across the country, who receive 100% of the unemployment benefits to which they are entitled by law. For these reasons, it is critical that the sequestration of RUIA be rescinded,” President Pierce and President Willis concluded

*Source: ble-t.org website, direct quote*

### **PTC Implementation Nearing Completion as Deadline Looms**

The deadline for installation of Positive Train Control systems, originally December 31, 2018, was extended to December 31, 2020 at the request of many carriers who did not have their tracks compliant two years ago.

As the new deadline looms, the Federal Railroad Administration announced on May 15, 2020, that 98% of tracks were now in compliance, with some 1100 miles still to go.

“We continue to work directly with all ‘to be compliant’ railroads — providing technical support and guidance as requested — to enable them to satisfactorily meet the congressional deadline,” FRA Administrator Ronald Batory said May 15. “I’m pleased with the growing number of railroads that have reached critical milestones and continue to encourage all of them to help each other overcome any remaining challenges from their respective lessons learned.”

Furthermore, the FRA announced that additional resources are being directed to help those railroads still in danger of not meeting the deadline. They must install FRA-compliant and fully interoperable systems to fulfill the congressional mandate.

A few carriers struggling to meet the deadline include New Jersey Transit,

TEXRail, Northeast Illinois Regional Commuter Railroad Corp. (Metra) and New Mexico Rail Runner Express (Rio Metro).

“We strongly urge the collaborating railroads to work in a safe, focused, and aggressive manner to meet this end-of-year deadline,” Batory said. “FRA has provided nearly \$2.6 billion in grants and loans and thousands of hours of technical assistance to help railroads fully implement PTC systems.”

Last month, the Government Accountability Office issued a report that determined rail operators had signaled optimism about an ability to implement PTC systems ahead of the December 31 deadline.

According to a recent Government Accountability Office report, operators were largely optimistic about meeting the deadline.

“With less than a year left to complete PTC, FRA and most railroads have completed equipment installation and are now focused on the testing stages,” the report said.

*Source: Transport Topics, <https://www.ttnews.com/articles/most-railroads-nearing-positive-train-control-implementation>*

### **Oil Trains May See a Resurgence**

A Federal Judge has temporarily shut down the Dakota Access Pipeline, leaving questions about how Bakken crude will be shipped if operations fully cease as the legal skirmish unfolds.

Rail safety advocates and farmers alike are concerned at the prospect of several more oil trains per day traveling unreliable tracks through the Northern Great Plains. Experts say a complete shutdown would require 200,000 more barrels per day to be shipped by train, equaling an additional three oil trains leaving the area each day.

*Source: Bismarktribune.com*

Jessica Cole lives in Baraboo, Wisconsin. She can be reached at [jcts1987@gmail.com](mailto:jcts1987@gmail.com), or 262-672-9742.

— continued on Page 13

## Nor-Cal Auxiliary 39 Scholarship Recipients for the 2020-2021 School Year



HILARY SANCHEZ



JARED BISBIKIS

Nor-Cal 39 Auxiliary is proud to announce the 2020 recipients of the Edward J. Pfiester Annual Scholarship. Mr. Pfiester, a FELA attorney, has been a long-time supporter of railroaders and their families. He has been supporting and helping our local auxiliary since before it was formally established. Through his generous donations to this scholarship fund, he has helped numerous children of railroad families further their education.

We are excited to congratulate Hilary Sanchez, the daughter of auxiliary member Lynnette Sanchez. Hilary attends San Francisco State University and is working toward her degree in Nursing.

We also wish to congratulate Jared Bisbikis, the son of auxiliary members Kathleen Bisbikis & Jason Bisbikis. Jared is a sophomore this year at the University of San Francisco, pursuing his International Studies degree.

We wish both of our winners the best of luck on their continued studies and, again, a big thank-you to Mr. Pfiester (<http://www.pfiesterlaw.com>) for making this possible each year.

## INFORMATION



WE ARE PROUD TO ANNOUNCE THAT WE HAVE THREE NEW LOCAL AUXILIARIES THAT ARE CURRENTLY IN FORMATION.

IF YOU ARE IN THESE AREAS AND WOULD LIKE TO JOIN, YOU CAN REACH OUT TO THE POINT OF CONTACT LISTED BELOW:

### LA CROSSE, WISCONSIN

MELA BYERLY - MELAB23@YAHOO.COM  
RACHEL ZENTZ - RACHELZENTZBNSF@GMAIL.COM

### PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

ERICA HILL - MRSERICAHILL@YAHOO.COM

### WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA

TINA HENDRICKS - THENDRICKS8@GMAIL.COM

# Every Vote Counts in 2020



*Voting is the expression of  
our commitment to ourselves,  
one another, this country,  
and this world.*

— Sharon Salzburg

## **Springfield, Missouri Auxiliary No. 417 Celebrates One-Year Anniversary and Hosts A Golf Tournament**

**By Rachel Pharris, President, Auxiliary No. 417**

To say that the members of Auxiliary No. 417 in Springfield, Missouri, have been busy this summer would be an understatement. We celebrated our One-Year Anniversary on June 22, 2020.

On August 15, we hosted our first golf tournament fundraiser to benefit our Scholarship and Care & Assistance funds. The benefit was held at Greene Hills Country Club in Willard, Missouri. The format was a four-man scramble with the top three teams winning prizes, including victory polo shirts from one of our generous sponsors, Key Apparel. The auxiliary provided lunch for all golfers and hosted a silent auction with items including bags from Autumn Creek.

Our tournament was open to railroaders, friends, family, and the public. We had a nice turnout for our first event. We want to send a special thank you to our Nor-Cal Auxiliary 39 sisters and the BLET Missouri State Legislative Board for their sponsorship.

We had many amazing volunteers, including members' children. Volunteers worked setup, staffed the silent auction area, served lunch, drove the drink/snack cart, and helped with cleanup.

We were able to raise \$2,000.00 to put into our fund.



Happy Anniversary Springfield Auxiliary 417! Left to right: Secretary-Treasurer Kelsey Epperson, Laura Hurd, Tricia Taylor, Heather Williams, and President Rachel Pharris



BLET Div. 237 Local Chairman Bill Brake, Kelsey Epperson & Heather Williams



Rachel Pharris, Laura Hurd, Shana Zbaren & Kelsey Epperson



Kelsey Epperson, Brad Pharris, Rachel Pharris, Carrie Johnson, Tricia Taylor, Amy Walters, and Laura Hurd

## Yellow City Bomb Squad Auxiliary No. 99 Volunteers at 52nd Annual Railroaders Golf Classic in August 2020



Auxiliary 99 Members Victoria Delahay, Pam Winbolt,  
Meagan West, and Emily Kohn-Schnatz

On August 18 and 19, the Yellow City Bomb Squad Auxiliary No. 99, in Amarillo, Texas, was invited to volunteer at the 52nd Annual Railroaders Golf Classic at Ross Rangers Golf Course and Comanche Trail Golf Course. It was so wonderful to see everyone come together, relax and play two days of golf. With 74 teams, over 50 sponsors, and over 15 volunteers, it was a huge success! This event, which took so much planning and hard work, could not have happened without the members of the Smart TD and BLET members. Thanks to all and we are excited to be a part of this event again next year!



## Happy Thanksgiving

*In the spirit of gratitude, we would like to give thanks to everyone for your unwavering support of the Auxiliary in 2020.*

*May you and your family be blessed with a holiday season of blessings, good health, and warm memories.*

## Members of Pacific Northwest Auxiliary 503 Provide Assistance to a Brother's Family

*By Jessica Keen, President  
Northwest Auxiliary 503, Salem, Oregon*

Our BLET Brother Tom Hannon passed away on August 21, 2020, after suffering a stroke onboard a Portland and Western locomotive the day before. Tom was a conductor for the Portland and Western Railroad and a member of BLET Division 416 since August 14, 2006. He is remembered fondly by his local union family, who, along with BLET Pacific Northwest Auxiliary No. 503, wanted to offer support and help Mr. Hannon's family by raising money for whatever needs arose during this difficult time. A GoFundMe account was set up with a goal of \$2,500.00. Within a week, the fund exceeded its goal by more than \$1,000.00. Mr. Hannon's wife and son are eternally grateful for this support.

The following is a message from Tom's adult son, written in memory of his dad.

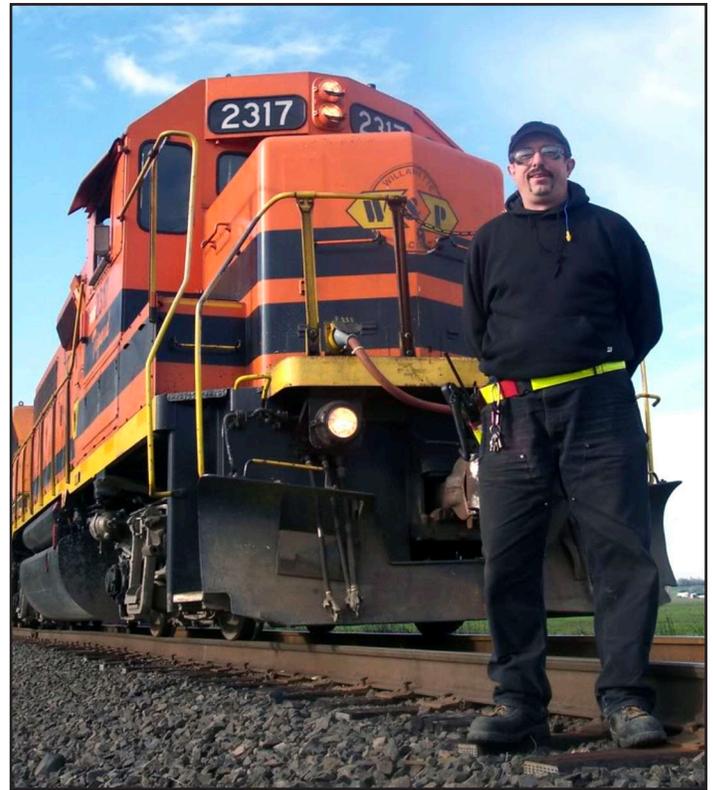
"My Name is Kyle Hannon and I am the son of Tom Hannon. Most people think my dad has always lived in Salem, Oregon, but in fact he was born in Taipei, Taiwan, before moving all around the world with his family. My dad loved to travel and seek new adventures. He worked hard his entire life to make sure that his family was always taken care of. After many years working for the Oregon-based Fred Meyer store chain, he decided to chase a new career as a railroader. He spent the past 14 years working for Portland and Western Railroad and loved every minute of it. He loved the friends he made at work and he loved telling our family stories from his work life.

"I've never met anyone in my life who could make friends as easily as my dad. Everywhere we went, someone knew him. When I was eight, we were at Disneyland waiting in line to go on a ride and we heard someone yell "Tom!" from the back of the line. It was someone he knew from his travels.

"My mother and I are so grateful for all the support we have received over the last few days from friends and family; we can't thank you all enough.

"Lastly, Tom Hannon was not just my father, he was my best friend and, even though it feels like my heart has been ripped out, I rest easy knowing that I have so many incredible memories to look back on. Thanks for always being there Pop!"

No one wants to plan for the heartache of losing a loved one; however it's a really good idea to "get your ducks in a row" in advance. It's not easy to remember what steps you need to take when your mind is reeling from a tragic loss. The Auxiliary was able to support Kyle and help provide him with information about the steps to be completed in a tragedy such as this. The following are some steps that can be taken in advance to make it easier on those left behind:



Tom Hannon, Conductor, Portland & Western Railroad

1. Make sure your paperwork is all together in one place. If under lock and key, make sure someone you trust has the key or combination.
2. Make sure beneficiaries on all bank accounts, insurance policies, investments, etc. are kept up to date.
3. Start a "rainy day fund" to cover unexpected expenses. Make sure to appoint a benefactor and make them aware of how to access your accounts.
4. Keep a list of all passwords, personal identification numbers (PINs), checking, savings, and other accounts, life insurance policies, and any other private information. Put it in a safe place and make sure that someone you trust can access it if necessary.
5. Create a Living Will and Power of Attorney and make sure that the appropriate person(s) know where to find these documents.
6. Know and understand the survivorship provisions of retirement plans.
7. Review wishes regarding funeral and burial arrangements and make sure your loved ones are aware of your wishes.

If you find yourself in a situation similar to what the Hannon family experienced, please reach out. It can be difficult to remember what needs to be done during these difficult times. Your local auxiliary members are here to help you in any way possible. A "Survivor's Guide" with more details and information for the surviving spouse can be found under "General Information" on the National BLET Auxiliary website, [www.bletauxiliary.net](http://www.bletauxiliary.net).

# Tidbits from National Secretary Lawana Poss

I hope this Newsletter finds you all healthy and safe! Many changes are taking place in our lives.

During this pandemic, please stay safe and well. Follow the guidelines that we are given. Please wear a mask when you go out and wash your hands often! Hopefully, we will adjust to our “new normal” because we can’t wait to see your smiling faces!

## CARE AND ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Please contact me for applications!! Please check to see if someone in your Auxiliary may be eligible and encourage them to apply. Members at Large are eligible also!! Please see our website for more information!

## WELCOME TO OUR NEW MEMBERS!

Kimberly Jones- Birmingham, AL

Kayla Damuth- New Braunfels, TX

## AUXILIARY SECRETARIES and MEMBERS AT LARGE

If I can help you or answer any questions, just let me know!!

Please send me all new members' applications as you get them so we can add them to our mailing list.

If you have a change of address, e-mail address, or phone number, please let me know!

Please contact me or any national officer when there is a death of a member or the death of one of their family members. We want to be able to send our condolences to the family. We would like to also share in the joy!! Please let me know of any exciting happenings!

**Please remember to cast your vote in November!! Every vote counts!!**

Thank you for your support and membership!



*Lawana Poss can be reached at 770-497-8898, or [Lewp2007@bellsouth.net](mailto:Lewp2007@bellsouth.net)*

*“Courage is knowing it might hurt, and doing it anyway...”*

*Stupidity is the same... and that is why life is hard.”*

*~ J. Goldberg*



## North American Railway Foundation®

*founded by the BR&CF*



Many thanks to the North American Railway Foundation (NARF) for sponsoring our newsletter and making it possible to share educational articles and information with our members across the nation, to keep railroad spouses and their families up-to-date on changes affecting benefits, and to educate our members about important legislation that helps promote safety on the nation's railroads.

The North American Railway Foundation, founded by the Brotherhood's Relief and Compensation Fund (BR&CF), was formed on October 22, 1996, as a nonprofit organization (a private operating foundation). Its purpose is to explore, nurture and support railway safety, efficiency, and technology, and to educate about and preserve the history of railroads in the United States and Canada. The goals of the Foundation are achieved by providing direct and active financial support to deserving non-profit institutions and projects, which exemplify the Foundation's purpose.

The Brotherhood's Relief and Compensation Fund, a non-profit corporation established in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, was founded on June 12, 1912, by Luther G. Smith, a locomotive engineer for the Pennsylvania Railroad, to provide job income protection to railroaders throughout the United States and Canada who were “held out of service” due to suspension or dismissal. Brother Smith did not object to the railroads using a method to discipline employees when such discipline was necessary, but he did not see the logic in innocent family members having to suffer when the head of the home made an error in the performance of his duties that resulted in a suspension or dismissal.

### North American Railway Foundation

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### Brotherhood's Relief & Compensation Fund

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Mechanicsburg, PA 17050  
(717) 657-1890

## Legislative Update

Continued from Page 7



FROM BECKY SCHNEIDER, ASST. NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE REPRESENTATIVE

### Vote! Vote! Vote!

For decades I have said that this is one of the most important elections of our lives. I really mean it this time, so make sure to vote. If voting by mail, request and get your ballots as soon as allowed. If you're voting in person and have access to early voting, take advantage of that opportunity. If you are young and healthy, and want to promote the democratic process, contact your local elections office and volunteer as a poll worker. Historically, most poll workers are retirees, but during the pandemic they are hesitant, and rightly so, to perform those duties.

### Attack on Health and Welfare Benefits

Twelve rail unions have joined together in a suit filed against the Class I Carriers in the DC District Court. The suit asks the Court to force the carriers to bargain in good faith negotiations with the unions over mandatory subjects of bargaining. Health and Welfare benefits have been a large part of collective bargaining for decades and more often than not were supported by the membership over wage increases.

The carriers are attempting to "restrict access to certain medications and to forcibly reconfigure healthcare networks," according to a BLET News Flash announcing the lawsuit. In part, the statement issued by the 12 unions states that "... Even more outrageous, the process they are attempting to impose would allow rail carriers to reduce employees' access to medicines and doctors in the middle of a pandemic, when they should be rewarding the contributions of the essential employees with hazard pay." Unfortunately, our new normal for corporations is to treat essential workers as expendable employees, according to the unions' statement. *Source: BLET News Flash, August 7, 2020*

### Brief Filed Urging Supreme Court to Protect FELA

The BLET, SMART-TD, and the Academy of Rail Labor Attorneys (ARLA) filed a joint motion and amicus curiae brief with the United States Supreme Court in *Melvin Ammons and Darrin Riley v. Wisconsin Central, Ltd.* According to the BLET News Flash reporting on this development, following a 2014 derailment, the conductor and engineer filed a suit under the Federal Employers' Liability Act (FELA), claiming the carrier failed to provide a safe workplace, which resulted in their injuries. The carrier argued in a counter claim that it was the crew's negligence that caused the derailment, and sued the employees for damage to railroad property in excess of \$1 million.

For those unaware, FELA is not like "no-fault" State Workers' Compensation Programs in that an injured employee must prove negligence on the part of the railroad in order to be awarded compensation for their on-the-job injuries. FELA law, created in 1908, also serves the purpose of providing an economic incentive to create safer work environments. The amicus brief asserts that seeking property damage from employees in the event of an accident would not only allow railroads to potentially avoid financial liability for its negligence, it could bankrupt the employee and their family, jeopardize current and future industry safety, and dissuade other employees from filing FELA claims.

President Pierce said, "This is the most important railroad safety case that the Supreme Court has been asked to consider in nearly a decade. It is of tremendous importance to all railroad employees, and the Court should protect workers by maintaining the balance of power created by FELA, as Congress originally intended." *Source: BLET News Flash, July 31, 2020*

### Kansas DOT Proposes Two-person Crew Safety Rule

Kansas Department of Transportation (KDOT) proposed a new safety regulation on July 27, 2020, which would require railroads to maintain a minimum of two crew members

in the cab of the lead locomotive while operating within the state. Governor Laura Kelly believes that by maintaining the current practice of requiring a two-person crew, the health and safety of Kansas workers can be ensured. She went on to say that the proposed regulation is "commonsense" to protect Kansas railroad crews and keep communities along the tracks safe.

*Source: BLET News Flash July 28, 2020*

### Setback in Laredo

The three-year BLET fight between Kansas City Southern (KCS) and the Tex-Mex over collective bargaining agreements has ended with the Special Board of Adjustment majority ruling in favor of KCS. The contention began in July 2017 when it was proposed that Tex-Mex shuttle crews should be replaced by KCS Mexico (KCSM) crews over the nine-mile route between the International Bridge and the Laredo, Texas yard. After negotiations failed, crew replacement was implemented a year later, just days after a judge enjoined a strike by Tex-Mex crews. The GCA argued that numerous provisions of the collective bargaining agreements were violated by KCS's actions, which reserved the work of moving Tex-Mex trains on Tex-Mex property to Tex-Mex crews.

Some agreements dated back to 1950, specifying that all cross-border traffic was to be exchanged at the border, with the practice being established in 1920. An Interchange Agreement between the Tex-Mex and KSCM contains the agreement that all trains operating north of the border are considered Tex-Mex not KCSM trains.

The Carriers countered that all they had done was to change interchange points and that employees cannot claim exclusivity to interchange service. They also blamed Mexican law for their inability to provide work equities. Mexican law does not allow trains to be operated in Mexico except by Mexican nationals. A provision proposed by the BLET — and supported by the IBT, Teamsters Canada, and the Mexican railway union — was excluded from NAFTA 2.0.

BLET Vice President Alan Holdcraft wrote a dissent to the majority opinion, pointing out the decision contained "significant errors" in its omission of the undisputed history and century-long practice, and the failure to appreciate the unprecedented nature of the changes the carriers had implemented, and also badly misconstrued road switcher rules. A reliance on the Carriers' business rationale for changes is not "the standard for determining compliance with the Agreement," Holdcraft wrote.

President Pierce expressed his disappointment with the ruling and thanked everyone who fought this issue for the last three years. "The Carrier was wrong in 2017 when it gave the jobs of hard-working Americans to Mexican Nationals, it was wrong in 2018, and it's wrong today."

*Source: BLET News Flash, August 6, 2020*

**Update prior to Press time:** The U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit Court apparently agrees with President Pierce and Vice President Holdcraft. A three-judge panel ruled on August 28 that, pertaining to the Kansas City Southern certification program under which Mexican crews are operating trains between the U.S.—Mexico border, the FRA must either "offer a fuller explanation of the agency's reasoning . . . or deal with the program afresh by taking new agency action."

The Court agreed that the FRA "failed to provide a reasoned explanation for its approval of the materially altered engineer certification program administered by one of its railroads." The Court declined to rule on several other objections relating to conductor certification, transfer of airbrake testing waiver for northbound trains, and hours of service recordkeeping. The Court also acknowledged the FRA's "shadowy and unwritten processes make it difficult for aggrieved parties to navigate jurisdictional constraints."

President Pierce and SMART-TD President Ferguson applauded the decision in the lawsuit filed jointly

by the two unions. "We congratulate the Court for exposing just how much the FRA has become captive to the railroad industry."

Source: BLET News Flash, August 28, 2020

### No, Railroad Retirement is Not Colluding with the Chinese

According to Axios, top White House officials have warned the head of the Board of Administrators of the Railroad Retirement Board (RRB) that he is exposing investors to undue economic risk and endangering National security because of investments in Chinese Companies. They also alleged that investments violate U.S. sanctions and assist the People's Republic of China's efforts to build its military and oppress religious minorities. First and foremost, **NONE OF THIS IS TRUE!**

The investments of Tier II Retirement funds are made through the National Railroad Retirement Investment Trust (NRRIT), as set up in the Railroad Retirement Reform Act passed in 2001, and not the Railroad Retirement Board, which administers the annuities for retirees and disabled railroad workers and their spouses. Board Chairman Erhard Chorle, a Trump appointee whose term expires in 2022, responded to a letter sent by White House advisors Robert O'Brien and Larry Kudlow accusing the Board of unlawful practices. Chairman Chorle advised the two Trump officials that the NRRIT is an independent entity whose seven Trustees oversee investments of the fund, and "who are not officers or employees of the United States." The actions of the Board of Trustees are not subject to approval or direct oversight of the RRB. Mr. Chorle advised that he has been assured by the NRRIT that the Trust holds no interest in the companies at issue, Hikvision and ZTE. He went on to explain why there may be confusion regarding the Trust's holdings, because they use the same benchmarks as most other companies throughout the world, none of which are in violation of any U.S. sanction. Why the Chairman of the RRB should have to explain any of this to the top White House economic and security advisors is disconcerting.

Later in July, the NRRIT responded to the RRB Board members, detailing the investment strategies of the Trust and their reliance on the Department of Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control to identify foreign companies to which sanctions are issued or that raise national security concerns, and plainly states they "do not and will not invest in such companies." Because the NRRIT is statutorily bound to diversify its portfolio, it does invest in some foreign corporations. As it has done since its inception, the Trust regularly evaluates their asset allocation and "will make investment decisions based on their analysis and review."

The Trust goes on to express its appreciation of the White House's acknowledgement that the Trust is an "independent non-governmental entity with broad statutory authority to make independent investment decisions. . . . This independent status is a direct result of Congress's intent that the investment of Trust assets should be free from political influence." Trustee's Chair Mary Jones further assures that "six of the seven Trustees also represent the interests of rail labor and rail management, who collectively have funded the Trust and have the most to gain or lose from the Trust's performance."

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John Bragg, RRB Labor Member, sent a message out regarding the NRRIT's letter, reiterating "that our Trust fund is stable and the investments are producing the returns needed to ensure the stability of the fund well into the future." He goes on to say, "Every railroader has the right to retire with financial security and a sense of dignity. The RRB, with the help of the NRRIT and its investments, helps ensure that right."

I for one am glad that these professionals are in place to deal with those who apparently are unclear or at least uneducated or misinformed on how our retirement system works. Thank you RRB and NRRIT!

Source: Axios/RRB/NRRIT/BLET News Flash August 10, 2020

### Amtrak Update

In order to save money during this pandemic, Amtrak has announced its intention to cut all but one long-distance train (the Auto Train) to three days per week, decrease its workforce by 20%, discontinue meal service, and close stations. Tom Downs, a former Amtrak President who dealt with similar situations in 1993, learned that cutting service was exactly the wrong approach to produce savings. Sixteen Senators have pushed back against this plan and strongly hinted that they were unwilling to grant additional monies for fiscal 2021 without obtaining more details as to how cost and revenues were affected by the proposed reductions.

As Mr. Downs noted, "you can't cut yourself into prosperity." Amtrak has received some COVID-19 related funds and stands to gain more from the INVEST in America Act passed

— continued on Page 15

## Greetings from your Editor, Jodi Wallace

Sisters and Brothers,

It is with a heavy heart that I am letting you all know that I am stepping down as the National 1st Vice President/Outreach Coordinator. Not long after taking the position two years ago, I started a business out of my house. And then this year, COVID-19 hit and I had to put on yet another hat and become my grandkids' teacher at home. Both of these two things, combined with everyday life, put me in a downward spiral and it became increasingly challenging to wear all of these hats at once.



By the end of May, I found myself getting more into a funk. Thank goodness for my family who helped me stay afloat, either taking care of my business or helping me with my duties as a national officer. In early June, I was finished wearing my "teacher hat" and found I was finally able to function normally again, and not feel pulled in too many directions.

Fast forward to the 2020-2021 school year. Up until two weeks before the new school year was due to start up, I thought the children would be physically attending school. It was then that I found out I needed to put my teacher hat back on and do it all over again. I realized I had to give something up if I was going to make it through another school year.

For this reason, I find myself having to step down from my position. My family always comes first and I cannot shut down my business, so, after I had a long talk with my husband Will, together we decided that, in order to avoid spiraling out of control again, I needed to step down as a national officer so that I could be fully present to teach the children and run my business.

It was a hard decision because I love my job in the Auxiliary. I have very much enjoyed meeting new people and interacting with others with whom I have met and become friends over the span of 12 years of attending regional meetings with Will. I will still be around at the summer meetings and help out when I can. I want to thank Kat, Lawana, and Terri for always being there for me and making my job fun.

My replacement, Rachel Pharris, is one of the first ladies I met who wanted to start a local auxiliary in her area. She is from Springfield, Missouri, and is the President of her local auxiliary. Rachel has great ambition and energy and will do very well serving in the position of 1st Vice President. Thank you so much Rachel; I am so happy to be leaving the position in good hands.

*Jodi Wallace can be reached at 1-541-663-6966, [jodi\\_wallace@bletauxiliary.net](mailto:jodi_wallace@bletauxiliary.net), or by snail mail at 1804 Washington Ave., La Grande, Oregon, 97850.*

## Introducing your Newly Appointed 1st Vice President/ Outreach Coordinator/ Newsletter Editor Rachel Pharris



It is with great excitement that I accept the position as National 1st Vice President. I am honored and humbled to be asked to step into this position. I have seen the amazing things the Auxiliary can do and I am very excited to help grow our National Auxiliary with new local auxiliaries and members-at-large. Being a railroad wife and mom is no easy task. The Auxiliary has really shown me that we need to rally around each other. Helping lead the Auxiliary is something I am very proud of. I look forward to meeting many new faces over the next few years.

*Rachel Pharris can be reached at 1-417-872-9641, [rachel-rae@live.com](mailto:rachel-rae@live.com), or by snail mail at 404 South Willard, Missouri, 65781.*

We welcome your submissions for our publication. Please send your stories, articles, photos, poems, etc., to:

*Rachel Pharris, Editor  
BLET Auxiliary News  
[rachel-rae@live.com](mailto:rachel-rae@live.com)  
417-872-9641*

The next issue will be published in December 2020. Please have your submissions to Rachel on or before November 15, 2020.

## Legislative Update

Continued from Page 14

by the House in July for ongoing infrastructure and repair needs and to offset severe drops in ridership due to the pandemic. Notable caveats to receive the funds are mandating that hot meals be served for all overnight trains, and the walk back of the break-even provisions for meal and beverage service.

We will have to wait and see how all this plays out in September now that Congress has gone on vacation for a month during this crisis..

*Source: Train Industry Newsletter/Rail Passengers Association*

Becky Schneider lives in El Paso, Texas. She can be reached at [beckybat@att.net](mailto:beckybat@att.net), or 915-581-1373.



## **BLET Auxiliary**

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