

Moorman Listens to Front-line Feedback During Commute on the Crescent

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America's passenger train faithful have placed a great deal of expectations on the shoulders of Wick Moorman. Even though the former Chairman and CEO of Norfolk Southern officially took the helm of Amtrak on September 1, he has spent much of his first few weeks on the job on a previously scheduled vacation to New Zealand. He is on the job this week, and at least one initial report gives me great confidence that he is approaching the role from the perspective of passengers and front-line employees.



A Heritage diner in the consist of the southbound Crescent departing Charlottesville in January 2014. Photo by Malcolm Kenton.

A source who wishes not to be identified spotted Moorman along with a man later identified as Mark Manion, former Vice President of Operations at NS, on the northbound *Crescent* on Monday (Oct. 3), traveling over familiar NS rails. They both

boarded train 20 at Charlottesville (where Moorman has a residence) and traveled to Washington. After leaving their belongings in the Business Class coach (forward of the sleepers, behind the baggage car and locomotives), they spent most of their ride in the Heritage dining car. They would have been indistinguishable from ordinary passengers had they not introduced themselves to the dining car staff — an introduction overheard by my source, who turned around and recognized Moorman.

Moorman and Manion, who were dressed business casual (blazers and slacks with no ties) talked to each other for nearly half an hour, with no special attention paid to them by the crew. Eventually, they introduced themselves to the Lead Service Attendant and engaged him and the server in conversation for about 10 to 15 minutes. They talked about how long their shifts were, how many trips they make weekly, about the menu, the storage and variety of food, and more. The two executives were listening and curious, according to my source.

Moorman and Manion then stopped the assistant conductor on her way through the diner, asking how long she had been working the route, about how the signals got called, how she divides responsibilities with the conductor, etc. The executives then proceeded to the lounge car, where the LSA showed them the inventory paperwork and described how it is done. Moorman commented that much of what is done by hand could be done with an iPad or similar device.

One crew member then matter-of-factly shared with the higher-ups his assessment that the food on the *City of New Orleans* is nearly inedible, and that the crew doesn't like having to serve such a bad product. The crew member suggested that all trains should have more fresh food and should be tailored to the regions they serve, with regional specialties. The execs also asked how many coach passengers were eating in the diner.

My source was encouraged that Moorman seemed interested in working conditions and customer service. My source had only previously met one other Amtrak president, Paul Reistrup, and in similar circumstances. He was traveling alone on the Broadway Limited and chatted with the crew in much the same way Moorman did.

Time will tell whether the feedback Moorman and his colleagues are getting from the rank and file will translate into process improvements that will help both crew members and passengers, or even into substantive upgrades in food quality and other aspects of the service. But 90% of solving a problem is properly identifying the problem, and listening and information gathering are key to doing that. In that regard, the new Amtrak administration seems to have started off on the right foot.