

Let's Talk!

The next VRE online forum will start on Wednesday, October 7th at 12:00pm. Click on the "VRE" Button below to submit a question.



There are currently 36 questions waiting to be answered.

VRE Management:

Happy October to everyone and welcome to our monthly edition of the on-line forum. For those of you new to the forum, VRE Management, which includes Rich Dalton-Deputy CEO/COO and Chris Henry – Director of Rail Operations, and other staff members answer service related questions for an hour. We can't get to every question but do our best to answer the most frequently asked and/or interesting ones. We try to have guests come into the studio and today is no different; we have Brian Barton, CSX Trainmaster for the VRE service area along with Earl Hunter who works with Brian in the CSX Passenger Department. Feel free to ask them railroad specific questions. The Fredericksburg Line operates on CSX territory from L'Enfant to Fredericksburg (and soon to Spotsylvania!). The Manassas Line operates on the same CSX tracks from L'Enfant to Alexandria then transitions to one of our other host railroads, Norfolk Southern.

Speaking of which, VRE has launched the Gainesville-Haymarket Extension Project website! Visit www.vre.org/ghx for more information on this study of a potential Manassas Line extension to Gainesville and Haymarket. #VREGHX (We know, we know, hashtags are becoming an overused thing, but we don't use them when we speak, we promise!)

We see lots of questions in the queue, so let's get started!

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Katie from Fredericksburg VA asks:

When will the spotsylvania station be open? I've read it will be mid to late September. Is there an exact date we can look forward to?

VRE Management:

There is no exact date as of now, but we are hopeful by the end of 2015.

Ellen from Tappahannock, va asks:

When will the Spotsylvania station open?

VRE Management:

This is a popular question so we will answer it again. While the station may appear to be done, there is still a lot of final detail work that needs completed, including getting the power and communications installed and tested, and of course the final inspections. Work is progressing quickly at this point, and the end is in sight. We will make a public announcement as soon as possible with a firm opening date.

Mark from Manassas Park asks:

What is the status of the Crystal City VRE Station Study?

VRE Management:

Beginning this month, we will start an initial study that will look at preliminary concepts of extensions of the Crystal City station which will lead into more developed studies down the road.

Dave from Springfield, VA asks:

Another 18 months and still no progress on the Lorton platform extension construction project. Any updates? Thanks.

VRE Management:

Project was previously on hold but will be released soon.

A from Fredericksburg asks:

So I guess the soft holidays did not make enough money for the VRE to run. The whole "federal employees are not our main source of income" that went out the window huh? Now I am not trying to be a jerk but you and the board raised the prices for so many reason a new station that is over due and over budget the 95 express lanes opening and someone need another assistant to get the coffee and wash the bosses car. Instead of give hope to people by having public hearings why not just say we are doing the rate hike because we can and we need the money or was is just a ploy?

VRE Management:

We do operate on occasions when the federal government is closed. For example, on snow days when the government is closed, but we determine it is safe for passengers to reach our stations, we operate trains. On the soft holidays which we have operated like Columbus Day and MLK, Jr. Day, we found out our ridership was only in 900 to 1800 total rides those days. Five to ten percent of our normal ridership is not enough to justify 16 trains (an "S" schedule day).

Rhett from Richmond, Va. asks:

The Congressional mandate deadline to activate Positive Train Control (PTC) across America's rail network is the last day of THIS YEAR; every railroad, including CSX and Norfolk Southern, have issued a statement telling Congress THEY WILL SHUT DOWN THEIR ENTIRE NETWORK starting Jan. 1, 2016 if Congress won't extend the deadline, which is completely NOT feasible, financially or physically. This is being echoed by ALL railroads nationwide as well as most commuter rail operations. If Congress WON'T extend the deadline and all railroads stop running this coming Jan. 1, what happens to VRE?

VRE Management:

US House of Representative Transportation Leadership has introduced a stand-alone bill that would extend the PTC deadline to 2018. We are hopeful this will pass quickly and be signed by the President in time to avoid any effect on VRE service.

Bob from Burke asks:

Where is VRE with servicing the creaking and moaning coaches? You previously said the issue was being addressed on a rolling basis in conjunction with maintenance. It is throughout the fleet and is just as prevalent now as the last two years. The running joke is we are on a stagecoach.

VRE Management:

If you have a specific car number please send as many details to gotrains@vre.org.

Carla from Rippon asks:

How are the crew doing who suffered in CSX accident? Our prayers have been w them.

VRE Management:

Thanks for your concern. We will pass your thoughts along.

George from Broad Run asks:

The quiet cars seem to often have the public announcements at a volume greater than the regular cars. I have asked the conductors to turn down the volume, which they do, but the next day the volume is right back up to that deafening level. As a matter of policy can the announcements in the quiet cars be at a lower volume than most cars, consistent with the purpose of having the quiet cars? Thank you.

VRE Management:

All cars are set at 72 decibels. Individual cars cannot be adjusted for safety reasons.

Karen from Manassas asks:

Really no service on Columbus Day? When will VRE catch up with history?

VRE Management:

See previously answered question.

Steve Petersen from Warrenton, VA asks:

The Broad Run Station continues to experience user growth and it's often difficult for later train riders to find parking. Recently I had to join dozens of other cars parking along the access road on both sides of

the long narrow road, which damages the shoulder asphalt and doesn't have a sidewalk for passengers to walk safely. I had to dodge several cars racing in to also find parking. It was very unsafe and only a matter of time before tragedy occurs. What is the long-term plan for parking improvements at Broad Run?

VRE Management:

Available funding is an important issue with regards to this station facility. Prince William County is working to develop a plan to manage the growth of the entire Bristow area within the confines of funding in their master plan.

Frank from Manassas va asks:

Is it possible to buy a step up ticket in advance and keep it for future use when needed?

VRE Management:

Step up tickets are good for one year from the date of purchase. So yes, you can purchase a step up in advance.

Dan from Manassas, VA asks:

How does VRE keep the outside of its cars so clean? I wish that Amtrak could do a similar job. Of course they are running for hundreds of miles, like between Boston and Lynchburg or Boston to Newport News.

VRE Management:

All cars are scheduled to be washed at a minimum of once a week. During inclement weather we attempt to increase the frequency.

Dave from Woodbridge asks:

Last year we were told a new train would be added to the Fredericksburg line in Oct 2014. Then we have been told it would start once the times were ironed out with CSX. It has now been a year. When will this train be added or has it been cancelled? We would like more current information.

VRE Management:

The much anticipated additional Fredericksburg line train is still planned to coincide with the opening of the Spotsylvania Station. We are working closely with our host railroads to firm up the schedule. We understand the need to get the word out as quickly as possible once a schedule has been finalized so passengers can better plan their commute. We will put that information out on all available channels as soon as we have something confirmed.

Arlo from Lorton asks:

We still are completely lost and guessing in the afternoon at Union Station in reference to which track the train will arrive on. We stand in the upstairs hallway, waiting to visually see the train coming in, and then rush down to catch it. Usually the escalator is running the wrong way for us, or stopped and we use it as stairs. Why is MARC so much more organized than VRE, they even make announcements on the intercom system for passengers, we are left to fend for ourselves! VRE gets a failing grade for this lack of service!

VRE Management:

We understand your frustration and will get personnel dedicated to VRE service at Union Station as soon as possible.

Jeff from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

When will the Spotsylvania VRE station open, and when will a schedule be put out to include the station's hours?

VRE Management:

See previously answered question.

Brooke from Brooke, VA asks:

You use to do public service announcements. You should really start them up again this time add personal space announcements. People on the platform seem to always like to get up-close and personal with people standing waiting for a train. I haven't yet but I really have wanted to shove people away that get within inches of me while I am waiting for a train. I understand the platforms are crowded but no one needs to get that close to someone. We are talking inches close

VRE Management:

Courtesy reminder!

Jeff from Broad Run, VA asks:

The quiet car is no longer quiet. You have consistently undermined the intent of the quiet car since Dale left. Last month you said it was OK to carry on a whispered conversation throughout a trip when VRE rules specifically prohibit that. Your use of "Its a quiet car not a silent car" is now used as an excuse by people who talk out loud, let their phones ring, and play music loud enough for all to hear. Your lack of

leadership has resulted in conductors who do nothing to enforce the rules. There are at least 5 other cars on every train. Why are you so opposed to a quiet car?

VRE Management:

A short whispered conversation is allowed. Long conversations should be moved to another car. We will do our best to minimize unnecessary noise, but the quiet car will never be completely silent.

Doug from Gainesville, VA asks:

The Broad Run parking lot is no longer safe. Cars speed down the lanes with no regard for people walking or the directional arrows clearly painted on the surface of the lot. We cannot safely exit at the main entrance because of the cars speeding around a blind corner just to the left of the entrance. There will be a serious accident soon, someone will be hurt or killed in this lot. Stop just resolving to talk to the police and change the way traffic is traffic moves in this lot. It is not safe and you are abdicating your responsibility to make it so.

VRE Management:

Prince William County if aware of this condition at the corner and is evaluating options. We will continue to work with Prince William police on traffic conditions in the lot.

D from Manassas, VA asks:

Why do you bother with this? People ask questions about such issues as smoking on the platforms, coach lighting, etc. and you always just brush them off as not important. So what's the point?

VRE Management:

We take all of our riders comments and questions seriously, we will try and provide more thorough answers when information is available.

A from Va asks:

When will the elevator at Franconia springfield be fix? What is the delay in repairs?

VRE Management:

We are hopeful for four to five months from now. This rehabilitation project is lengthy.

Mary from Manassas asks:

Now that the weather is getting cooler, is it possible for your techs to adjust the temperatures up in the cars. I and some of the others I ride with have noted trains 326 and 329 have been cold. Thanks!!

VRE Management:

The system is set to a nominal set point of 70 degrees. If you have a specific car number you want us to check, please send it to Gotrains@vre.org.

Nick from Haymarket, VA asks:

I work up near Baltimore, up until May I used the VRE and MARC every Day. Based on the falling price of gas with the increase ticket prices makes driving more feasible. Why did the systems loose reciprocity with each other? What are the future price plans for the VRE Ticket?

VRE Management:

MARC is no longer able to offer cross-honor trips to VRE passengers due to legislative action. VRE however still honors MARC's tickets for reverse flow service.

Marie from Manassas, VA asks:

Could you please remind folks that scent - perfume or cologne - is meant to draw people to you. When you wear a Pigpen cloud of scent it not only drives people away from you, it also negatively impacts the people trapped in a closed environment, like a train car, with you. You may not be able to smell you anymore, but the entire carload of fellow train riders can and many are tearing up and sneezing. Please be considerate and use moderation.

VRE Management:

Courtesy Reminder!

Marie from Manassas, VA asks:

I ride M328 in the morning. Tickets have been checked once in the last 8 days. This only concerns me because I can't help but wonder what other duties the staff aren't completing if they aren't doing this one? Are safety checks being completed, are the responses to radio calls being done by rote, or are they actually answering based on fact?

VRE Management:

The standard for each crew is to perform 100% ticket checks, however; the safe operation of the train takes priority. We will look into why tickets have not been checked recently.

Unwilling Eavesdropper from Manassas Park, VA asks:

Could VRE start a new reality series, either web-based or cable TV? We have some of the most personal information being proclaimed in the loudest Voices. For instance, a guy was discussing his divorce. By the time we got to Broad Run, every passenger knew even the most sensitive details his marriage, life & upcoming divorce. It might not be the quiet car, but folks need to consider how loudly they are discussing their personal information or sensitive gov't details.

VRE Management:

Interesting idea, but we will just go with this as a courtesy reminder.

Lee from Burke asks:

One morning (ca. 7 a.m., maybe on Wednesday?) last week, two VRE contractors/employees appeared to be illegally parked at Burke -- one in a handicapped space on the second floor of the parking deck, and one in the bus circle. This isn't the first time I've witnessed this phenomenon. Is that allowed?

VRE Management:

Contractors may need to park outside of marked spaces on occasions but only for short periods of time.

Ron K from Springfield, Va asks:

How well maintained is the railroad bridge across the Potomac? Are there plans to replace it?

VRE Management:

The long bridge is a CSX asset and is maintained to the same exacting standard as the rest of their railroad. The District Department of Transportation, in partnership with VRE and the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation is currently studying the long bridge. See www.thelongbridgeproject.com

Larry from Fburg, VA asks:

With all the ticket electronic options being resolved, why is WiFi such a hurdle for VRE. Thanks

VRE Management:

The problem with Wi-Fi continues to be the lack of wireless coverage along several points of our service area.

Not Silent from Manassas Park asks:

I have stopped sitting in the quiet because of the sound wardens. Actually, the writer of the complaint 2 months ago is a female that rarely speaks to anyone while traveling, preferring to sleep or listen to my earphones. The very rare instance I whispered to someone, I got called out. The 'sound cops' disturb me more than people whispering have ever done.

VRE Management:

Thanks for the comments.

John from Washington, DC asks:

I really like technology improvements when they save time, money and flexibility so I have really been watching the VRE ticket App. However, every time I see someone on the train using it, it takes more time to check the eticket than the paper ticket by from the conductor, the rider often has problems pulling it up and then recently their was the software glitch. Is the ticket App really an improvement over the paper ticket? It doesn't seem cost effective or beneficial just yet.

VRE Management:

Thank you for the comment John. VRE Mobile is a big improvement over the paper tickets both in convenience for the passenger and is cost effective for VRE. We are currently making changes to the app which will enable passengers to more quickly launch and display the ticket for inspection by the conductor. The issue we experienced on October 1 was related to a bad file received with the SmartBenefits information for the month. Since that process is automated between WMATA and our developer GlobeSherpa, we did not discover the issue until someone attempted the first purchase. We have since added an alarm that will notify us if a file comes in that is corrupted or missing data. We also have implemented a means of using the SmartBenefits "forecast" file, which we receive a few days earlier in the event that the final file has issues. Overall, VRE Mobile has been a big success with nearly 9,000 downloads of the app and now accounting for more than 10% of our sales. Try it out, we'd love to hear your feedback once you've used it.

Kathy from Leeland asks:

will vre run if there is a government shutdown?

VRE Management:

Our plan is to continue regular service.

John from Haymarket, VA asks:

I love the VRE and the Conductors are very friendly & professional. I think that when checking tickets the Conductors should walk up to the second level rather than try to check the tickets from the first level. This puts the onus on the passenger to go out of their way to show the ticket even though it may be hanging on a band around their neck and is very visible if the Conductor would just make the effort to go up to the second level. Do you agree?

VRE Management:

We prefer them to go upstairs but there may be times when it's not possible.

Jessica Zepeda from Bristow, VA asks:

Will there ever be mid-day or weekend service? There has been discussion of expanding 66, but not expanding rail (that I know of). I live in PWC and commute on the VRE every day. I think a better, more economical solution is to expand commuter service on the railroad. Adding a third track between Broad Run and King Street would get commuters to Alexandria, allowing them to transfer to either the metro or VRE train into the district. Also, it would provide public transportation on weekends.

VRE Management:

Midday and weekend service is planned in the latter years of the VRE System Plan 2040. The Gainesville/Haymarket extension of the Manassas line is under study and we agree VRE is one of several regional strategies that would be effective.

BrandOn from Manassas, va asks:

Are you seeing all the developemnt in Manassas Park and are you thinking of parking? There will lots of new poeple that are going to take the train.

VRE Management:

VRE, on behalf of Manassas Park, is beginning a study to evaluate future parking alternatives for the Manassas Park station.

David from Woodbridge, VA asks:

Why has it taken 10 months to redesign VRE's website?

VRE Management:

You will see a new and improved VRE website within the next month.

Rob from Rippon-VRE's #1 Station since 2009 asks:

was the Papal visit a "loss" so to speak for VRE. i felt like i didn't see more than a handful of "tourist riders" bound for papal events on empty trains with the Feds all teleworking?

VRE Management:

Ridership was lower than expected.

Samantha from Burke asks:

When will the mobile ticket app be updated so that when you open it, it goes right to your ticket? I love the app but it is not convenient to have it default to the Buy Tickets screen. Thanks!

VRE Management:

Before the end of the year.

Jimmy from Burke asks:

Is there a way to better control traffic in the parking garage at Burke Centre? People are rude and almost hit you when you try to leave, and it is very hard to get out of there in the evenings. Especially hard to get out of there with your car intact.

VRE Management:

We will communicate this to Fairfax County Police.

Tom from Manassas asks:

correction: longbridgeproject.com

VRE Management:

Thanks Tom.

VRE Management:

Thanks everyone for the great questions, but our hour is up. As a reminder, we are not operating VRE service on Columbus Day, October 12, 2015. Please check with Amtrak @ (1-800-USA-RAIL) if VRE step-up tickets will be honored that day. However, we will be operating trains for Clifton Day on Sunday, October 11th, visit www.cliftonday.com for more information.

In the interest of your safety and continuous improvement, Amtrak is working to keep commuters from

stepping off the platforms on to the tracks at Union Station. Please remember to stay off all tracks to keep safe!
See Tracks. Think Train!
Rich, Chris, et al.
