

Virginia Railway Express

Feedback

Let's Talk!

The next VRE online forum will start on Wednesday, December 7th at 12 noon.



There are currently 138 questions waiting to be answered.

VRE Management:

I can't believe it's December already. The holidays are almost upon us. We know it's really cold, especially for those of you who have been waiting for delayed trains recently.

We know you have a lot of questions about timeliness which we will try to address them during this hour along with the many other questions that have been posted.

Larry from Fredericksburg VA asks:

In the last forum I asked about switching out the quiet car with another one. I didn't mean switching the LOCATION of the car. But, why couldn't you put a car other than the cattle car in the quiet car position? Thanks.

VRE Management:

We understand that not everyone prefers the old Gallery cars. However, the "quiet" car is always located in the second position on the train right behind the locomotive. As we developed this program, we needed to choose an easily recognizable car that was consistent. The cab car wasn't an option because of the bathrooms, so this was the logical choice. Currently, there are no plans to change this scenario.

Marc from Fredericksburg asks:

Congratulations on a successful Santa train program, although I am very disappointed that I was unable to obtain tickets. This was because tickets went on sale during a business day at locations not convenient to me, coupled with the inability to enter your website (I assume due to limited bandwidth). As you know tickets sold out very rapidly. I completely understand that first-come-first serve is probable the fairest way to handle this, but any plans to expand this program so that supply is adequate to handle the demand.

VRE Management:

I am sorry to hear that you won't be able to join us. Santa Trains continue to be the most popular, non-commuting event we participate in. This is operated to benefit Operation Lifesaver, a railroad safety association, and is done and managed solely by the 30+ people that work in the VRE office. Because these are not commuter trains, they are required to make money or break even (Did you know that track access costs are donated by CSX and Norfolk Southern and that no VRE passenger fares or local subsidy money is used to operate them?). Consequently, we are not in a position to expand them further. Doing so would increase the cost and jeopardize its charity status. So for the foreseeable future, the number of trains will remain the same.

Scott from Fredericksburgh, VA asks:

Why isn't there any handicapped parking spaces in Lot D. There are none there and several in the other other lots further from the station.

VRE Management:

The requirement is to have a specific number of spaces for disabled parking for the total number of spaces available. We are working to move as many spaces close to the station as possible. The required Lot D spaces are handled near the station, which is why you don't see any there. It is our plan to add more ADA spaces near the station.

Mark from Manassas, VA asks:

Instead of doing minor improvements with the rise in population are there any plans to model the VRE similar to the Long Island Railroad or better? Wanted improvements, more scheduled trains, trains running in both directions all the time, more conductors

on the trains, trains running on the weekend, more room between seats, when situation warrants (i.e. Government early dismissal / inclement weather / Special Events in DC i.e. Marine Corp Marathon, Marches, Cherry Blossoms...) adding more cars or scheduling more trains to run.

VRE Management:

Mark, thanks for writing. The difference between VRE and most other major cities commuter rails is the funding mechanisms and track rights. Los Angeles, New York, New Jersey, and Chicago all have automatic funding in place that is either collected through sales taxes or other taxes. VRE is not funded that way. We do not have an automatic mechanism, while a gas tax of 2.0% is collected for transit, it is not designated for us. It is instead split between many transit projects that need funding. To make major schedule and other improvements we would need to tap into a significant portion of the money that is collected. At this time the local jurisdictions that govern and fund VRE are not in a position to give us that.

James from Falmouth asks:

On average, how many citations does VRE cite each year to passengers caught evading the fares. I have never witnessed such an event in over 11 years of riding the rails while observing the many veiled threats of such issuance.

VRE Management:

VRE issues, on average, 20+ citations each year. Our fare evasion rate is less than 4%, and is below the national average. We believe that most of our commuters are fair and law abiding citizens which accounts for our low citation rates.

Ronald from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

People are abusing the parking @ the commuter lots. I noticed at least 6-8 cars Tuesday morning that were 'snowed' upon (meaning they were left there overnight). It's not fair to let people use the commuter parking as parking spots!

VRE Management:

Overnight parking, at your own risk, is permitted at most of our lots. We do monitor the spots to be sure that cars are not left or permanently parked there. If we see it, or if it is reported to us, we send our security personnel out to flag the car. If it is still not moved in a reasonable amount of time, we work with the local jurisdiction to have it towed. We can send someone to Fredericksburg to take a look.

Kraig from Manassas asks:

Why are the passenger cars so cold? Feels like no heat or minimal heat. I'm, unfortunately, riding the Sounder cars in the morning and in the afternoon. Bad enough riders must suffer riding knee-to-knee and now it's very cold on the cars.

VRE Management:

The way that the Sounder cars load with the doors opening into the actual passenger compartment has caused these cars to be and seem much colder than others in our fleet. We recommend that people who are cold sit upstairs or in the car closest to the locomotive. Generally, the cars should be between 68 and 72 degrees. If you feel once you move, that it is still too cold, please submit your concern via the mechanical feedback form on the website.

Mickey from Woodbridge, VA asks:

Why is it not possible to get information in a more timely fashion? For instance, this morning's train on the Manassas line was almost 45 minutes late - yet no announcement until it was already over 30 minutes overdue. This leaves no opportunity to pursue alternative transportation means. Also, what happens if a person has already validated their ticket, but because of delays, would want to seek alternative transportation?

VRE Management:

It is our goal to provide you with information of service disruptions within 10 minutes of the delay. We did not do this. For that I apologize. I know I have talked about this with you before, and we still don't have this right. Worst case, you should be receiving information within 10 minutes our best estimate of the delay.

If you validated your ticket and left, please send a copy of your ticket along with a brief explanation of the date, the train you were attempting to ride, you address and daytime phone number. We will send you an FRC to make up for the unused validation.

Paul from Brooke, VA asks:

Will the windows on 300/307 ever get cleaned. Rain and snow storms don't count.

VRE Management:

They were cleaned last weekend. However, the windows are made with Lexan and not glass. Over the years they have been etched by the acidic cleaner used by the car washers which makes them appear to be dirty when they are not. My goal is to have all of the windows replaced with glass.

Dennis from Fredericksburg VA asks:

Any possibility of getting vending machines at the VRE Stations? Some simple vending machines could earn VRE some money and provide a nice creature comfort for those that sometimes end up waiting for trains

VRE Management:

Right now, our lease with CSX and with Norfolk for the stations (they are built on the right of way) only allow fare collection equipment on the platforms. We agree that vending machines would be great, but because they require a contract change we are not pushing them at this time. Both contracts are up for renewal and are currently being renegotiated. This would be an add-on to that contract.

Suzi from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

Are there any plans for more direct trains from Fredericksburg to DC? Those of us who ride from "9" to "1" and back wish things could be a little bit more speedy (i.e. not making all the stops). The Amtrak trains do not run early enough for me to utilize the service. I hope that with the new station in Spots County that VRE would consider more direct trains for the long-haul commuters. Thanks!

VRE Management:

We agree. Part of our long term is to run more "express" type trains. However, they won't operate before the new Quantico Bridge is complete. This project, along with some others, must be done in order for all the trains to occupy the tracks at the same time.

David from Lorton, VA asks:

First, I would like to say that VRE provides a quality service that is much appreciated. Second, I'm wondering if you've considered using the PA systems at each station to make an occasional announcement regarding train courtesy and etiquette?

VRE Management:

Thank you. Etiquette is a tough one to manage. We try to limit station announcements to service specific or parking lot issues. Train etiquette issues are left for on-board announcements. If you have a pet peeve that you feel we haven't addressed email your suggestion to gotrains@vre.org.

Mike from Fredericksburg VA asks:

Why after more than 3 weeks after switching the equipment for the 305 train is the intercom system still not working? We went from the very nice Wave or Sounder train to what has to be the worst train in the fleet. The least that could be done is to make sure it is in working order. Thanks for your answer on this. Mike

VRE Management:

The PAs should work. I will ask someone to look into it. In the future, please email any mechanical concerns, like this one, by using our feedback form at <http://www.vre.org/feedback/mechanicalconcerns.php> so we can look into this more quickly.

Paul from Manassas asks:

I had asked this question last month, but you apparently ran out of time to answer it. Are the VRE tickets honored on the new Circulator buses in the District?

VRE Management:

Only TLCs are honored on the Circulator buses. All others must pay \$1 per trip. However, this is a terrific and economical service that the District is providing. I encourage anyone who has not tried it to give it a shot. It operates from Union Station and by L'Enfant Plaza. Look for more information on this in an upcoming VRE Update.

Joe from Fredericksburg asks:

I have seen the conductors chastise riders for not validating FRCs and then they hand validate. I have also seen them hand validate machine validated FRC. In either case, the FRC has been validated, so what's the big deal.

VRE Management:

You are required to validate your FRC prior to boarding. Some conductors are more lenient than others in this respect. However, you are taking a chance of being issued a summons if you board without validating your FRC.

Diane from Washington, DC asks:

Are you aware of how loud your hold music is, on the telephone when talking to your office? You have to hold the phone away from your ear while Louis Armstrong belts out What a Wonderful World.

VRE Management:

Our customer service manager hates it, too. However a gremlin within the phone system has prevented us from providing something more interesting. We have just hired a new network administrator who our customer service manager will be begging to change the music and the volume as quickly as possible.

Dave from Lake Ridge, VA asks:

Is VRE planning to add more 8 car trains?

VRE Management:

We don't have enough equipment at this time. However, we do have plans to implement more in the future.

Davin from Woodbridge, VA asks:

Has Diesel Fuel prices dropped? Gas has gone down back to post-Katrina levels.

VRE Management:

Diesel fuel has dropped but not as fast as gasoline. In fact diesel fuel is more expensive than high octane gasoline.

Rick from Lorton, VA asks:

Why are cars allowed to remain overnight and over the weekend in the Lorton VRE lot? Over 100 cars remain over night and over the weekend in the Lorton VRE parking lot (usually occupying spaces closest to the platform). Most all belong to owners (riders) from counties south of Fairfax (as evidenced by their county tax stickers). As winter weather (and snow) arrives, this creates a significant problem since snow removal equipment can't access parking spaces efficiently and snow is piled in the few spaces left over exacerbating the problem.

VRE Management:

More than 100 people are now detrainning at Lorton daily. These people are traveling from the south to Fort Belvoir daily. Although many of them utilize the Fairfax Connector buses, others leave cars at the lot and use those for the short drive to their jobs. We realize that this presents problems for the snowplows, but in the long run these people are doing the right thing by trying not to clog the highways. Since there is still space in this lot it isn't too much of a problem right now, but it is something to make sure that Fairfax keeps an eye on.

Frank from Gainesville, VA asks:

I park at Broad Run. Sometimes the spots are almost a mile away, due to inadequate parking by VRE. The question for you is: how do you expect to increase ridership if you have insufficient parking?

VRE Management:

We expect to add 115 spaces to the old barn site by the end of the year. However, you are right, without significant amounts of additional parking spaces, ridership growth is curtailed. Station parking is a jurisdiction responsibility for funding. Like everything else, funding is hard to come by for station parking.

Michelle from Manassas, VA asks:

Thanks for taking the time to chat with the riders! I enjoy VRE and look forward to my ride every morning and afternoon. However, I glance with envy at the Fredericksburg line trains. Why do they get the new trains first? Are there more commuters come from that direction? Aren't we important too? Thank you, Stepchild in Manassas

VRE Management:

Our train lines remind us very much of a family. Each side always thinks the other has it "better". (-: You aren't a stepchild. We have four trainsets that are new equipment. Two sounder sets and two Kawasaki sets. The Kawasakis reside on the Fredericksburg line and the Sounders on the Manassas line. That way everyone gets the same.

Michele from Manassas Park asks:

When will construction on the Manassas Park platform be complete? I thought it was scheduled to end in November - and until recently we certainly had beautiful weather to work in.

VRE Management:

The work is currently expected to be completed by the end of the year. Underground fiber optic cables needed to be located prior to starting construction. Consequently, the project was delayed until they could be properly identified and protected. It is very close to done - weather permitting we expect to have full use of the platform by the end of the year.

Gaile from Manassas, VA asks:

Did VRE attend the town hall meeting with Governor-Elect Kaine in Manassas on 11/29? If so, or if not, does Mr. Kaine plan to help VRE with funding?

VRE Management:

We did. While it is too early to speculate on what Governor-Elect Kaine will do, we know that he is well aware of our needs. Like last session, we are hopeful that our local lawmakers, who know VRE best, will once again include VRE in the budget deliberations.

Ed from Fairfax, VA asks:

Why can't 21st century technology solve the switches problem that seem to cause the most delays?

VRE Management:

Most of the railroad was built with old technology. As new switches and signals are put in they are updated with the latest technology and integrated with the old. However, upgrading the whole system is beyond the budget capabilities of the railroads. This goes for other systems as well – for example switch heaters (to keep them from freezing) are now electronically controlled, but a few that are powered by gas heat with pilot lights still exist.

Donna from Manassas, VA asks:

I was on train #326 this morning and had a very unpleasant encounter with a young female conductor. Do you have customer service standards in the contract with Amtrak? Do you monitor the service provided by train personnel? The attitude of some conductors is more than surly. Do they realize that your passengers are the reason they have employment?

VRE Management:

We have an excellent consultant helping us with our new Secret Shopper program which we anticipate implementing in early 2006. Among the many things that the shopper will report on will be crew interactions, availability of fare collection equipment, the cleanliness of trains, and the timeliness of PA announcements.

The majority of our crews get very high marks from our passengers on the customer service survey and they recognize that they are an important part of our service. It is possible that you came across someone new. We will look into this with Amtrak.

Pete from Burke asks:

What's the story with train 326? It has been significantly late the last couple of days and I haven't heard a peep out of VRE as to the reason why. Perhaps it is still suffering from too much oak leaf oil! How long is this going to continue?

VRE Management:

326's problems have nothing to do with oil on the tracks. Although we wish it were that simple. While I still don't have a good answer as to why this train has had mechanical delays three days in a row, I will have answers by the end of the day. The same problem will not occur tomorrow.

The issue yesterday with the announcements stems from the fact that when the train lost power, we lost the ability to track it. Because the conductor was working on solving the problem, he was unable to give us timely updates on the train's locations. Subsequently, we were unable to provide timely information to you.

Joe from Burke, VA asks:

With the obvious increase in ridership and longer trains, are there plans to lengthen the platforms so we don't have to work our way through the cars to get off?

VRE Management:

Increasing platforms is on our wish list. It was part of our request from the Federal Government TEA funds. Right now it doesn't look good for funding this part of our needs. Railcars and locomotives must come first if funds are available. (Santa are you listening?)

Barbara Ann from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

Since the vote passed to build a VRE Station in Spotsylvania County; Where exactly will the new VRE Station be built/located ? Thank You.

VRE Management:

To answer this and other Spotsy questions:

The Commissions are now in negotiation with Spotsylvania for them to join the Potomac and Rappahannock Transportation Commission. This negotiation is ongoing and is expected to be successful, but nothing is signed yet.

Rich from Annandale asks:

RE: Ronald from Fredericksburg:... abusing the parking @ the commuter lots. There are some riders that may not return home every day, if their job requires air travel. If they (I) am on extended travel , I should not fear for my car being towed due to passenger complaints from people who don't take in the bigger picture (outside their personal commuting woes). Thanks VRE for trying to help all your varied passenger 'personalities', with a smile too!

VRE Management:

If you have been following along, you can see that there are two sides to every story.

Terry from Burke VA asks:

When is the plexiglass wind shields going to be replaced. Why isn't extra plexiglass kept in the event of a repair. I'm assuming that each station has similar measurements?

VRE Management:

The Burke plexiglass shields will be done by late next week. The glass had to be procured (3 competitive bids are required for us government types) and by waiting a bit we were able to get a much lower price.

Charlene from Lorton, VA asks:

The Lorton Station parking area is becoming quite dangerous due to cars awaiting 'sluggers' who are temporarily parked directly in roadways, etc. They are, quite frankly, inconsiderate of other cars and walkers trying to ride the VRE. Who is responsible for monitoring this parking area?

VRE Management:

Fairfax County is responsible for the Lorton lot. We will forward your concerns onto our contact at the County.

Arthur from Burke, Va asks:

What's with the "S" schedule for December 23? That's a real workday, not a day-after-Thanksgiving day.

VRE Management:

It is our understanding that many of the businesses as well as the government will operate on an early out schedule. Past history has shown our loads to be light on this day (many people get this day off, because Christmas Eve is a Saturday).

Brenda from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

Hello, I ride the 302 and 305 trains to and from Fredericksburg and Crystal City daily. I was wondering why they have stopped announcing the station stops aboard these trains. Thanks, Brenda

VRE Management:

We have heard from others on your train. We are looking into it.

Mike from Clifton asks:

Could you briefly explain the physics behind a 3,000 horsepower locomotive not being able to accelerate a 600 ton train on rails partially covered with leaves?

VRE Management:

Physics was never my best subject, so I can't explain the exact science behind the problem that occurred the night of the leaf related delays. What I can tell you is that the track in that area operates through a heavily wooded area. The leaves completely covered the tracks, then the severe storm that evening more or less glued them in place. The weight of the locomotive "presses" the oil from the leaves causing the slippage. The sanders were working and dumping sand, but the locomotive was not able to gain enough friction to gain momentum. Add to that was the fact that there was a slight uphill grade, making it even more difficult.

Karen from Lorton asks:

I see you are encouraging people to send in their tickets for FREs that were not received. However, I can tell you that this system seems to be broken also. I have one FRC request from October and two FRC requests from November pending at VRE (they all seem to be being ignored)--I faxed them. In addition, I was affected by the Pre-Thanksgiving midday train, but was out

of town for ticket distribution and all of last week--missing the ten day window for submitting my ticket for an FRC. Why isn't your office staff more responsive? I have not received a rejection or an FRC.

VRE Management:

We are behind on sending these out. Please be patient while our admin staff works to catch up.

AI from Warrenton, VA asks:

1. Why all this whining about the lack of money. The ridership increased 4-5 times, as well as the fares. Is there anybody else in the world, claiming to get bankrupt over too many customers paying too much? 2. What about competence? On all levels. Why decision making takes hours? Why crews can't start engines? Open doors? Switch from AC to heating when it's 21 F outside?

VRE Management:

A number of years ago, additional riders filled the trains providing us with incremental fare revenue with no change in expense. This is why until several years ago, we did not have yearly fare increases. Now that trains are at capacity, we have very little incremental fare revenue. In addition, fare revenue covers between 50-60% of the operation. The balance has to be met with state and local funding. Therefore we need more state and local funding.

Certainly, we understand your frustration in other areas and are working to make improvements.

Joe from Springfield, VA asks:

With only 11 out of 21 locomotives and 28 out of 50 gallery cars in use, can't you have a protect trainset for each of the three yards? Train cancellations like those on Thanksgiving eve should not be happening.

VRE Management:

Yes, the acquisition of new locomotives has taken a back seat to new rail cars. The reason is quite simple. We can overhaul our engines as needed to improve their reliability and performance. Now that the federal transportation has been passed and we have a better idea of where we stand, we can move forward with programs to overhaul the engines. However, we also need more seats if we are to continue to keep up with ridership demand. We cannot overhaul our cars and add more seats. We need to purchase more cars. We know from our experience with the Gallery cars that newer cars are the better route for us to take at this time.

Harry from Fairfax, VA asks:

Can Norfolk Southern buy the the track from Alexandria to L'Enfant? I think switch and signal problems would be greatly reduced if they relieved CSX of managing it.

VRE Management:

Certainly, we understand your sentiment. However, the tracks are private property owned by CSX, a private corporation. We can't facilitate a change to owns and maintains them anymore than you could force Shell to takeover Exxon, for example.

Ray from Virginia asks:

Why don't you answer all of the questions? Even posting answers after the chat session is over would be better than just ignoring your customers.

VRE Management:

While we would love to answer all of your questions, there simply is not time to address each one. Dedicating someone to handle all of the forum questions would take them away from their other responsibilities. As most of you know, we do answer questions via email. Although even that is growing and taking longer and longer to answer. I wish it weren't that way, but answering as many as I can within one hour is the best we can do.

Joe from Fredericksburg VA asks:

Dale, this is not a question but a comment and note of thanks. Several times in the past several months, I've left items behind on trains -- twice on VRE, once on Amtrak. (I know -- I need more sleep!) In each instance, railroad service personnel went well out of their way to reunited me with my stuff. I want to take this opportunity to thank you and your excellent staff at VRE, and to note that Amtrak has similarly high quality people serving us in the DC Metro Area. Many thanks to all and Happy Holidays.

VRE Management:

Thanks. We know we have good lost and found staff and we work hard to return lost items to their rightful owners.

Sally from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

Recently, the Orange County Transportation Authority in southern California approved a five-year plan to fund Metrolink

commuter service with trains every 20 minutes from 5 AM to midnight, seven days a week. When can we expect something similar here?

VRE Management:

I don't expect to receive that kind of funding from the Commonwealth at this time.

Larry from Lorton, VA asks:

Does anyone in VRE's office have any real railroading experience prior to working with VRE?

VRE Management:

Yes, both our Superintendent of Operations, Safety, and Security and our Manager of Operations Support (who works on the mechanical issues) come from freight railroad backgrounds.

Archibald from Woodbridge, VA asks:

Why doesn't the midday train that operates as 301 carry passengers when it returns to Union Station?

VRE Management:

The only way we could convince CSX to allow us to operate the mid-day train was to agree to have the return train operate as a "dead head" with no passengers.

Geoff from Fredericksburg asks:

As you struggle with the challenges of delivering on your current commitments, do you ever "envision" a time when VRE might offer a modicum of weekend service on the Fredericksburg line? As I watch the tourists swarm up Caroline Street, it seems to me there is significant long-term potential to promoting weekend "pleasure" trips in both directions. MARC, I believe, offers trains to Camden Yards, for instance.

VRE Management:

I do not see VRE offering weekend service in the future. While we never offered weekend service, many years ago we allowed VRE ticket holders to ride select Amtrak trains on the weekend. Unfortunately, not enough people took advantage of this program to warrant the costs associated with it.

VRE Management:

We had over 180 questions and can sense the frustration over a number of service issues including on-time performance, mechanical issues, and temperatures on board the cars. I ride the train every day and so does nearly half of our staff. We have first hand knowledge of many of the issues you brought up. I was on train #326 yesterday when it was an hour late.

I am working with Amtrak and the railroads to remedy as many of these problems as we can as fast as we can. I have reorganized how customer communications is handled internally. We should see benefits shortly. These improvements will not happen overnight, but they will happen.

I am emphasizing to Amtrak and our mechanical forces that we must prepare deficiencies as they are reported.

On a lighter note, I look forward to seeing some of you at the Santa Train this Saturday (I'll be wearing red at Burke Centre!). If I don't see you, I hope you and your families have a very happy holiday. I'll talk again with you next year.

-Dale
