

Let's Talk

Our on-line forum is now closed. Thank you for your comments.

Miss last month's discussion? Our [February discussion](#) is still available for viewing in on our website.



VRE Management:

I can't believe it's been three weeks since the last time we did this. I know that the topic today is of interest to a lot of you. It is a serious topic because it affects everybody, but I wanted you to know before we start that fare increases are not taken lightly at VRE. By the same token, we have to sustain the services we have today and try our best to make improvements. That's not possible without fare increases. So let's get started.

Clyde from Fredericksburg asks:

I am a resident of Fredericksburg and support our involvement with VRE. That being said, is it fair that I can not get a parking place anywhere near the train station, while hundreds of Spotsylvanians, who do not fully support VRE, thus ride at a reduced rate, get to park much closer just because they take an earlier train? It seems that those of us paying the premium price should get the premium service. Why not reserve the better spaces for riders from communities that support VRE?

VRE Management:

We agree that Fredericksburg residents should have precedence on the limited parking at Fredericksburg. We are working with the City to ensure that Fredericksburg residents have parking at or near the station. We ask residents to contact Erik Nelson, Senior City Planner, (enelson@fburg.city.state.va.us) if they are in a position where they are not able to get parking in the City owned lot. He is keeping a tally and, should the demand for parking significantly outstrip demand we will work to move more parking to Fredericksburg only. (There are two lots in Fredericksburg which are leased and do not use Federal money – these would be candidates for this move. This isn't possible at other stations where the lots are funded or were built using FTA (Federal) monies)

Mark from Broadrun, VA asks:

For the Manassas line, Zone 1 to Zone 6. How do the current and proposed fare increase (and total monthly cost) compare to other transit lines, such as MARC train in MD? People that I know who travel similar distances on MARC seem to pay much less on a monthly basis than we do on VRE? The differenc is between \$30 and \$40/month. Why do we have to pay more than they do even though the distance travelled is the same?

VRE Management:

That used to be true, however not so much any more. MARC rail does receive more subsidy from the state (MTA) than VRE does. However, they have increased their fares significantly over the last few years bringing their fares in line with VRE. To compare a one way ticket going from DC to Baltimore (45 miles) is \$7.00 – a one way ticket on VRE from DC to Fredericksburg (53 miles) is \$8.10. That is roughly the same cost per mile. This doesn't take into account any fare changes that VRE or MARC may make this year.

Joe from Burke, VA asks:

The 10Trip ticket is the most flexible ticket available, yet you are reducing the discount associated with this ticket. Why? Wouldn't you want to encourage this ticket to current/new riders. Many riders are currently on alternate work schedules, or telecommute between home and client offices etc... and don't ride the VRE every single day. Thus the 10 trip pass offers the most flexibility.

VRE Management:

We understand why it may seem that 10-ride ticket holders consider the changes proposed for this year, and those enacted last year, unfair. As this change impacts over 40% of our riders, we appreciate that the change will be uncomfortable. However, it is important to explain why we are making this fundamental, intentional shift in VRE's ticket policy. VRE is employing a business model that prescribes giving the largest discount to the most frequent users. Monthly ticket holders are the top of this tier as they use the service the most in a calendar month; second is customers using the service five contiguous days (five day passes); followed by ten ride holders, who can use the service any ten days out of a year, and finally single ride tickets. The reasons for this change in philosophy is growth – as VRE becomes larger with more passengers riding the trains, passes are a less expensive way to manage tickets. A pass holder only visits the machines or vendors once a week or month. This means only one trip to the machine, and, perhaps, one trip to a vendor who charges VRE a commission. Ten ride and single trip users visit the machines for every ride, and therefore, are a more expensive ticket to maintain over time.

Joseph from Stafford VA asks:

Why not completely do away with the Free Ride Certificates? The discontinuance of the free ride program will save a significant amount of money.

VRE Management:

Typically, we have found that more FRCs are given out through our service guarantee than are actually used. Therefore, the cost of this program is relatively small when compared with the amount of additional funding needed. In addition, we would prefer to focus our efforts on keeping the trains on-time so that a minimal number of FRCs will actually be handed out at any given time. Having said that this is an area which will be closely scrutinized as we move forward.

Blake from Fredericksburg asks:

Why aren't Free Ride Certificates given for Amtrack trains?

VRE Management:

Amtrak trains are not part of VRE service. They are an option for VRE riders, but we cannot be responsible for their performance.

blake from Fredericksburg asks:

Why not implement a step-up fee for riders that are from non-member counties (ie, Spotsylvania) that do not support VRE?

VRE Management:

We recognize that many of our riders are coming from outside the “family” of jurisdictions that fund VRE. Unfortunately, charging more for that select group of riders is not an option. In terms of ticketing, charging fares based on where someone lives is not feasible because VRE uses federal funds. Discriminating according to residency is a violation of federal policy and could result in the loss of funding and/or litigation. While we could adjust zone costs, it would affect everyone riding from that zone.

Ali from Manassas VA asks:

Csn you explain the possible price changes? In the VRE Update it mentions that the Monthly Pass discount goes from 33% to 34% yet the price for a ticket has actually INCREASED a couple of dollars. IS this fuzzy math or am I missing something here. Please explain how this works. Thank You.

VRE Management:

Certainly, let me explain. The discount is the “discount” from a single ride fare. We are discounting monthly tickets 34% from a standard single ride fare, but as the cost of the single ride fare is increasing the combination (the change in “discount” and fare increase) actually evens out to an overall 1+% increase in the overall ticket.

Mark Torres from Stafford, VA asks:

I heard yesterday on the news that VRE users had decrease and this was in part because of full parking lots and trains. Have you also consider that another reason of losing riders is because of fares increase? At least that is my case. If it is true that the cost of running VRE increases double as inflation, it wouldn't be too costly for everybody in a near future?

VRE Management:

As anyone who rides our trains regularly knows, ridership is up. Unfortunately, that was an erroneous story that started with a local paper and was then picked up by other organizations. The newspaper reporter looked at average daily ridership from September and compared it to December. With December being a vacation month ridership is traditionally lower than September. Overall, ridership is actually increasing in the 7-8% range from a year go.

Joe from Spotsylvania asks:

Would you talk a little about why fares need to go up despite the fact that there are more people riding now than ever before? I'd think more riders would translate into more income.

VRE Management:

Each year, VRE costs rise and we must adjust our budget to accommodate the changes. Previously, when our ridership was increasing at 18% per year, this revenue increase subsidized the increasing costs of operations. Now with trains and parking lots almost at capacity, our ridership is increasing at less than 8% a year. This increase does not create enough incremental revenue to pay for the increasing operational costs. As a result, in order to continue to fund operations, VRE needs increase its budget 5.5%. Not all of this increase will be borne by the passengers. To minimize the overall cost to the passengers, the VRE Operations Board and the member jurisdictions will split the deficit between a fare increase and a subsidy increase. This means that the member jurisdictions will contribute \$525,000 more funding and overall fare revenues will need to rise 2.75%.

Virginia from Fredericksburg VA asks:

I support the \$2 step-up fee for those riders using Amtrak. It is a premium service and the riders should help offset the cost to VRE.

VRE Management:

Thank you. There is a definite split between those that support (and may not use) the Amtrak trains and those that use them often.

Ron from Manassas asks:

Do you answer all the questions in the order they come in, or just the easy ones?

VRE Management:

I like the easy ones! I try to answer a representative sample.

Donna from Dumfries, Va asks:

Is it possible to get a look at the proposed 2006 budget? If so, how or where?

VRE Management:

Yes, it is possible. Go to the About section on the VRE website and find the Operations Board Agenda items for December. You can print a complete copy of the information there.

Kathy from Fredericksburg asks:

RE step-up fee. Has an agreement been made/confirmed with Amtrak to process the step up fee?

VRE Management:

Yes, we have an agreement in principle with Amtrak.

Tim from Fredericksburg asks:

This sort of relates to fares. I buy the monthly TLC pass to ride from Fredericksburg. I also get the FRCs whenever to VRE is 30 minutes late. The problem is that TLC riders and many Monthly Ticket riders never really get a chance to use their FRCs. (Or is that by

design?) Even if I could save up, say, 10 FRCs and supplement the rest of the month with 10-trip tickets, I would still have to pay Metro fares. This sort of defeats the purpose of trying to save money by buying the TLC passes in the first place. In addition to being worth one free ride, why couldn't the FRCs also be used as a voucher (sort of a "mini-Metrochek") towards the purchase of a Monthly Ticket or TLC pass? It would seem that it would be in the VRE's interest to do this. If an FRC could be worth, say, \$5 towards the purchase of a Monthly Ticket or TLC, then VRE would lose less money than what it loses on a free ride. VRE would lose less money on paper if nothing else and make your end-of-the-year accounting look better. A single ride from Zone 9 to Zone 1 is \$8.10. If the VRE is going to lose money by giving away free rides anyway, wouldn't make more sense to lose \$5 rather than \$8.10?

VRE Management:

I understand the problem. We are taking a really hard look at the FRC program. Right now, the issue is an accounting one. FRCs cannot easily be exchanged for regular tickets or vouchers because of accounting standards.

Tom from Fredericksburg asks:

I understand the need to raise ticket prices, but the highest percentage increase is again being assessed against the riders that purchase the 10-trip tickets. Because I telecommute 2 days per week, I can only use the 10-trip ticket - the other choices do not make economical sense. My questions - 1. What percentage of the riders use the 5-day pass, 10-trip and and monthly? 2. Please explain the rationale for the 5-day pass - if you travel everyday you would get the monthly pass. 3. Why are you increasing the discount for monthly riders - everyone should bear the same average fare increase?

VRE Management:

While we understand that some of our passengers do not commute everyday, those passengers who do ride everyday are the ones who will receive the largest discount on their fares. This is just like a frequent buyer program at any other retail establishment. Last year's fare restructure was successful in moving passengers to the more discounted passes. The percentage of riders using number of monthly passes has risen from 42% to 47%. In addition, approximately 7% of our passengers are using the 5-Day pass. With the proposed changes, I anticipate that an additional 12% of our riders will switch to either Monthly or 5-Day passes. The rationale for the 5-Day pass is to create a deliberate shift towards the passes and away from individual validations. No matter how well our TVMs work or how many we have, if we continued emphasizing validations, we would never be able to keep up. The wear and tear on the machines would be enormous.

Joseph from Stafford VA asks:

Is there any discussion of discontinuing the free ride service to a limited number of law enforcement officers using VRE? There are a large number of law enforcement officers which probably pay and ride VRE already. The service is unfair for them. Everyone should pay their fair share

VRE Management:

One of the challenges that VRE faces is that, unlike Amtrak and our host railroads, we do

not have our own police force. In an effort to address that we have to programs designed to assist us. The first allows any uniformed law enforcement officer with the power of arrest to ride without a ticket. The second allows registered undercover law enforcement officers to receive a monthly ticket in exchange for a promise to assist the conductor in the event of a felony on board. To keep this program manageable, it has been limited to 130 officers. While this may seem unfair, it is done in the interest of increased security on-board our trains.

Rick from Stafford, VA asks:

What do you consider "on-time" when computing you % on-time metric?

VRE Management:

A train is considered on-time if it reaches its final destination within 5 minutes of its scheduled time.

George from Stafford asks:

I don't believe that 10 trip is third ...I believe that 10 trip is the most used ticket and that most of the customer base used 10 trip tickets...please advise where figures to support your claims may be verified.

VRE Management:

40% of our riders use the 10-Trip. It's substantiated not only by our TVM data but also by our revenue data that we collect each month. It is further verified by our customer opinion survey that we do each May.

Tony from Spotsylvania, VA asks:

Create a premier ticket, charge an annual fee and needs no Amtrak supplements, no validation - come as you go - it's a service I'm willing to pay a premium for.

VRE Management:

This is something we are considering.

Bill from Manassas, Virginia asks:

Has VRE analyzed the impact on the MetroChek allocation of those riders who receive this benefit?

VRE Management:

60% of our riders use Metrochek, which means 40% have no subsidy at all. We know that and we consider that when we look at fare increases.

Matt from Stafford, VA asks:

Why doesn't VRE try to get revenue from other sources, ie. advertising, vs taking money from customers..

VRE Management:

We do. It has doubled in the last few years, but it is not enough to off set the need for fare increases. It is important to note, not all of the monies needed are coming from fares. Half are coming from local jurisdictions.

dave from **manassas, va** asks:

will Amtrak receive any of the \$2.00 step up fare?.....for handling etc.

VRE Management:

No. The full \$2.00 will come to VRE.

Rick from **Centreville, VA** asks:

Thanks for the good service! When can we expect a station in the Clifton area?

VRE Management:

Good! Another easy one. You won't see a station in Clifton for a long time.

Dee from **Burke, Virginia** asks:

I'd like to see more stringent checking of tickets. There are several instances during the week when my ticket is not checked. I like to think that most passengers are honest :) but I also think you may "find" some lost revenue with more stringent checks. Thanks

VRE Management:

Funny you should mention that. We are in the process right now of doing on-board inspections to verify our fare evasion rate. Many of you have seen our yellow jacket brigade come through your train, check tickets, and leave sticky notes. So far, we are pleased to find that our evasion rate is low. Having said that, we are continuing the pressure on our crews to be sure that everyone pays their fare share.

Jack from **Burke VA** asks:

What is behind the sudden emphasis on summons for ticket matters? VRE, to include the AMTRAK crews, has a generally pleasant and helpful reputation, so the new emphasis on enforcement seems unusual. It may invite hostility and lead to stiffening attitudes – if VRE has to be this rigid, customers will be more inclined to challenge every service problem. We've had a less than satisfactory experience with the validation machines. This leads me to wonder how many summons are typically issued each month? Is someone making a mountain out of a molehill, only to regret it later.

VRE Management:

This is the other side of the coin from the last question. It's only fair that should people be caught not validating or using an invalid ticket that they be penalized. We realize when it's you and you simply forgot that it seems harsh, but we cannot put our crews in a position of picking "honest" versus "dishonest" people. It has to be implemented fairly across the board.

Darrell from **Manassas** asks:

It appears that your proposed fare structure is not responsive to nor supportive of the needs and commuting patterns of many of your riders. Only 7% of your riders are using the ill-conceived 5-day pass and only about 1/2 of your riders are using monthly passes. That means that over 40% of your riders are using other ways to pay for their commute. The vast majority of those are using 10 ride tickets. You seem to be trying to balance your budget on the backs of those who ride frequently but whose commuting pattern or travel requirements prohibit the use of your preferred way to collect fares. This fixation on monthly and 5-day passes also seems to be non-supportive of Congress's desire to increase opportunities for telework and telecommuting. Please explain your rationale in light of these comments.

VRE Management:

People telecommuting and working flex schedules by definition pay less fares than those people that must work 5 days a week. Our policy is written to those that use us the most and provide those people with the largest discount.

Joe from **fredericksburg, va** asks:

Since you started this chat line none my question have been answered

VRE Management:

We have answered a lot of questions from Joes, but I guess not yours. I want to thank you for writing and riding. We'll try to get to as many as possible. Right now we have over 115 questions pending.

z from **lorton,va** asks:

why does vre pay for riders to use amtrak? vre could get their 500,000 dollars by paying \$5 instead of \$10 dollars. all vre riders will not have to pay any increase.

VRE Management:

Of course, if we didn't pay, we could not use Amtrak trains. However, \$500,000 would only provide one additional train for VRE. The current cross honor schedule actually provides more seats and opportunity than one VRE train.

Mike from **Stafford, VA** asks:

Your article this morning carried what seemed like veiled threats to stafford residents concerning their community funding vote. What options are you talking about in this article.

VRE Management:

Currently, Stafford County has signaled that they will not pay \$90,000 of additional subsidy in FY 06 as a part of VRE's budget. Meetings are being scheduled between VRE Board Members and Stafford County Supervisors. We will keep you updated on the progress. We are not discussing specific options because we are hopeful that this will be resolved.

Allen from Spotsylvania, Va asks:

Are there any scheduled structural improvements for the Fredericksburg Station? This facility is rather run down. What does the future offer in the line of inside accommodations for passengers at your stations? There is a great potential to generate some serious income in doing this. I fully approve of the fare increase, it is quite apparent that VRE needs more money, the train stations are in bad shape.

VRE Management:

We have requested \$2.5 million from the Federal government to make structural improvements at the Fredericksburg station. Congresswoman Jo Ann Davis is sponsoring the request.

Lou from Stafford, Virginia asks:

Why doesn't VRE have several Town Hall meetings to discuss this fare increase with the riders?

VRE Management:

We are. Public hearings are scheduled for Fredericksburg, Manassas, Crystal City, Alexandria and hopefully Stafford. The schedule is on the website.

Audit from Stafford, VA asks:

When was the last time that VRE was audited? I written to my congressman and asked that VRE get audited. I don't beleive that the money is being handled correctly by VRE management. You never seem to answer the tough questions and when you do the answers often skirt the issue and provide no response. Will this audit affect how you go about getting more money from the tax payers of VA, by constantly raising prices and not looking for alternate revenue solutions?

VRE Management:

VRE is audited every year by an independent CPA firm.

Jerry from Woodbridge, Va asks:

Is their going to be any additional cars added to the Fredrickburg line? There are not enough seats for everyone forcing people to stand for the duration of their commute (I could easily see someone falling and getting hurt as there are no handles to hold onto when you have to stand).

VRE Management:

Yes, eventually all single level cars will be removed and bi-levels put in their place. In addition, when we gain additional mid-day storage, we will lengthen trains.

Dan from Manassas Park asks:

Can you explain the logic of purchasing cars with restrictive maintenance needs that can only be addressed on the Fredericksburg line? Will any new cars be limited to these same requirements?

VRE Management:

The requirement is the pit inspection. Currently, there is only a pit at Fredericksburg. However, an additional pit is being constructed at Broad Run as we speak. This will allow more flexibility in equipment movement. Those of you that ride from Broad Run have noticed a lot construction lately!

John from Lorton, VA asks:

The current fare structure is "tedious" for most federal workers because of the various flex schedules offered by the government (e.g., four days every other week) -- this means buying a 5-Day Pass for certain weeks and a 10-Ride for others, and of course checking the calendar ahead for holidays and other out-of-office periods before the fare cards are purchased. The size of this flexing audience is very large and merits consideration by VRE -- will you?

VRE Management:

I am very aware of the Federal flexing audience. Keep in mind 40% of our riders are non-Federal workers and they work five days a week and do not receive Metrochek. I must also consider these people when we do fare increases.

Davin from Woodbridge, VA asks:

Every since Dale Zehner took over VRE, he's been raising fares every yer. This would be the 3rd year in row. Before VRE went years without raising fares. Their is no rule that says fares have to be raised every year. Metrochek has not gone up in years and so I have to pay part with my own money and VRE is getting more expensive. Remember VRE's mission is to provide a cheap ride. Raising fares goes away from the mission. Make money by more advertising and make subsidies pay more. The Feds should give VRE more money too.

VRE Management:

Wow! I don't know where to start. First I've cut a lot of programs that have saved a lot of money. Those weren't popular either, like the ART and DASH bus subsidies, weekend Amtrak cross honoring, and service on Federal holidays. Second, many people do not agree with your argument. They feel that it is a benefit to ride VRE and that you should pay more than our fare increase and reduce the state and local subsidy on VRE.

Randy from Burke asks:

This is a very beneficial and proactive approach to interacting with the ridership. I encourage you to make these forums available more often and on a permanent basis. Assign senior staff members who can comment accurately and freely to host these sessions on a regular periodic basis.

VRE Management:

We are planning on holding these once a month. I expect to host them all and will bring my senior staff in from time to time. I am glad that you have enjoyed these forums.

VRE Management:

We are nearing the 10-minute mark and are working to answer as many of you as possible. Several of you have asked what happens to the questions when we are done. Unfortunately, we cannot answer all of them, but are keeping this record for review by our Operations Board. They will see both all of the questions and those we were able to answer.

Stacy from Spotsylvania asks:

Has VRE spoken to Spotsylvania county about contributing to the VRE fund since a great deal of riders like myself come from Spotsy?

VRE Management:

Yes, I have briefed the Board of Supervisors at Spotsylvania County. We are continuing to have dialogues with them and strongly encourage them to join VRE. I think you will see a decision from Spotsylvania within the next 6-12 months.

Michael from Clifton, VA asks:

You told Ali from Manassas, VA that "the cost of the single ride fare is increasing." How do you square that statement with the statement on the List of Proposed Changes" [http://www.vre.org/feedback/fare_changes_2005/fare_change_index.htm] that there is "No change in fare structure to the 5-Day pass or the single or round trip ticket"?

VRE Management:

The discount for the 5-Day pass is not being changed. However, the base fare is changing and the amount of discount is not. We will work to make this more clear.

Steven from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

The 5-day ticket option is completely inflexible. I usually don't know when I buy a ticket that I might have to take off a day or two during the week due to a family emergency or the weather. Just a few weeks ago, I bought a 5-day pass on a Tuesday, the next day it snowed, and I lost three days of my ticket because I had to stay home due to school closings. You don't offer a rebate, continue to increase the price of 10-day passes, and I can't afford to shell out over \$200 for a monthly ticket ... HELP!

VRE Management:

In the past year, 7% of the ridership, or 560 riders, each month buy a 5-Day ticket. It is not inflexible for people who must work every day of the week.

Paul from Stafford, VA asks:

Since Stafford and Fredericksburg subsidize Spotsylvania VRE riders by providing them with free parking (At the expense and inconvenience of Stafford and Fredericksburg taxpayers), an equitable solution would be to issue free monthly parking permits to Stafford and Fredericksburg riders and have Spotsylvania riders pay a monthly parking fee (\$50.00 ?) to use the Fredericksburg, Leeland Road and Brooke parking lots. Costs incurred by issuing the permits are easily covered by the fees, with the balance offsetting the expenses incurred by 900 Spotsylvania riders, that their county government refuses to take

responsibility for. Thank you

VRE Management:

We wish there was an easy and legal way for us to gain more revenue from those people who ride from non-participating jurisdictions. However, as we accept state and federal funds, we cannot discriminate based on where people live. This goes the same for parking. Anytime federal funds are used, you have to provide equal access -- either charge everyone for parking or charge no one. It is a tough position but we are working to bring Spotsylvania and Fauquier into the VRE fold.

Sam from Fredericksburg VA asks:

Instead of raising fares, can't you just reduce the number of trains you run each day...especially the empty ones!. You could lengthen each train by one or two cars on the remaining trains. I notice that the current schedule requires you to make more runs than there are trains...thus several trains must make two "passenger" runs, which requires them to also make a "non-revenue" or empty run back to the starting point. It seems a huge waste of money to run the several trains several times the full length of the line...empty! The airlines rarely, if ever, fly empty planes...why should you run empty trains? For example, on the Fredericksburg line, each day, there are currently six northbound trains and seven southbound trains. Why not reduce that to just five morning and five afternoon trains (i.e., you could eliminate the 301 early afternoon train, especially since that one must run back to Union Station...empty...to also be one of the later southbound trains that same day). You could add a car or two to maintain the same passenger capacity using fewer trains. I'm sure that, with innovative scheduling, you could do this within the constraints of CSX track availability for operations and midday/overnight storage.

VRE Management:

We could but it would reduce the number of available seats to riders in the peak. These trains that travel against the flow are making a return trip for a second rush hour trip. It is cheaper to run a second train than to operate an additional train set. In addition, we do not have the storage space or equipment to operate the second run trains on their own.

Rocky from King George, VA asks:

Are the proposed fares for each of the zones published anywhere. I'd like to see what this fare increase/revised discount proposal is all about in terms of dollars and cents by zone and ticket type.

VRE Management:

We printed them in the VRE Update today and they are on the website. Additionally, we will post FAQ's on the website in response to the many questions that publiccomment@vre.org has received.

VRE Management:

I was looking for easy ones. There weren't very many this time. But seriously, thank you sincerely for your questions. It is impossible to get to all of them. I will be in Fredericksburg for the first public hearing on Thursday, March 17 (no green beer!). I will be able to answer any of your questions. As always, thank you for riding VRE and I look forward to talking

with you next month.