



Let's Talk

Today's forum is now closed. Look for our next on-line forum which is scheduled to be held on Wednesday, June 1 from 12:00n until 1:00p.

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VRE Management:

Hi there! Dale here. I cannot believe it has been a month. Although Wendy tells me that is how I started our conversation last month! I am ready to answer your questions. Let's go!

Kelley from Springfield, VA asks:

Sometimes excessive diesel smoke enters the passenger car trains. Why does this happen and what, if anything, is being done to alleviate this problem? I have had severe asthma attacks because of this problem in the past. An asthmatic, concerned rider.

VRE Management:

Usually this is a problem on the southbound trains when the engine is in the lead. The problem stems from the tunnel that all of the trains go through as they leave Union Station. Because of the amount of exhaust that collects in this tunnel, our crews are instructed to turn off the ventilation fans. Sometimes, this does not happen as it should. Sometimes a passenger will walk through the cars while the train is in the tunnel and let the exhaust into the car. If you are seeing this regularly, email gotrains and give us the train number so we can look into it.

Bob from Woodbridge asks:

Is there any end in sight to the late trains in the Morning. Almost every morning the first train is late and I miss my bus. I realize there are mitigating circumstances involved (e.g. designated posted speed limits etc.). It just seems that meeting the posted arrival time shouldn't be that big a deal

EVERY morning.

VRE Management:

I assume you are referring to Fredericksburg line train #300. We do monitor our on-time performance daily and know that this train has suffered quite a bit recently. Of the 7 delays to this train in April, 5 of them were during the last week of April. This week has not gone much better. As you suspect, most of the causes are beyond our control. Most recently, CSX has implemented speed restrictions along most of the track from Quantico to Lorton and some freight trains have been in the way. The speed restrictions will be lifted as soon as the minor repairs are complete. CSX reports that they have made progress, but are not yet complete. This train also has a high passenger load making dwell time at the stations longer.

Esther from Fredericksburg asks:

How will the Amtrak step-up system work; will it be books of tickets or some other form; and will we be able to purchase these tickets at off-site vendors?

VRE Management:

We are still waiting for the final vote on the proposed fare increase, which will be tomorrow night by our parent commissions. If approved, the Amtrak step-up tickets would be the same as all of our current tickets with Amtrak Step-Up printed across the face. You would be able to purchase one at a time at the platform TVMs or multiple tickets at any of our vendors.

Randy from Fredericksburg asks:

I propose a two-minute lime limit for the use of the restrooms. Anyone who takes more than two minutes gets thrown off the train by the people standing in line. What do you think?

VRE Management:

I don't know about this one. Can you imagine the fun the Washington Post would have if we instituted a 2-minute pee time. We can, however, remind everyone in our courtesy announcements to be as quick as possible.

Davin from Woodbridge, VA asks:

Will the new train talk and web site enhancements be available later this month?

VRE Management:

Good question. We are currently beta testing the improved Train Talk system. If all goes well, we'll roll it out in stages to you and others at the end of May. The new website will also come at that time.

Tom from Woodbridge, VA asks:

What is the purpose of the cab car? It doesn't look like Amtrak trains have cab cars.

VRE Management:

The cab car is the car that the engineer can operate the locomotive from when the engine is pushing the train. We use a push/pull method to avoid having to "turn" our trains. Amtrak, on the other hand, has its engines pull their trains at all times.

James from Burke, VA asks:

I have noticed that on some of the cab cars, when the cab is not in use, there are employees who are smoking in the cab. Thinking that the trains were no smoking, I was wondering if it is possible to allow passengers who smoke the use of the cab as well on a rotational basis. This seems only fair since the smell of the cigarettes drifts into the passenger compartment teasing all the smokers who must wait to detrain in order to light up.

VRE Management:

This is absolutely not allowed under any circumstances. Please email us at gotrains to let us know what trains you are seeing this on so we can stop this practice.

Dave from Woodbridge, VA asks:

When you went to buy new railcars, why did you not take a look at Kawasaki. Everybody loves the comfortable Kawasaki railcars. We hate the Gallery cars the VRE loves.

VRE Management:

We solicited all car manufacturers, but only received one bid which proposed Gallery style cars. We intend to buy 11 Gallery cab cars once we receive authority from the commissions tomorrow night. These will be used to replace the single level Mafersa cab cars now in service. As part of this procurement, we will improve the interiors of these cars to make them more in line with what we know our passengers prefer.

Robin from Burke asks:

When will Burke Centre's South EZ Bus route be modified to include stops that are closer to more townhouses? From my observation, the South Burke Centre EZ Bus currently runs 3/4s empty, and most of the stops are closest to single family houses, with only a few passengers, and not closest to the streets with more townhouses.

VRE Management:

EZ Bus is a Fairfax County initiative. Fairfax County has taken a look at the routes and because we anticipate starting a garage at Burke within the year, they will make modifications to the route once construction has begun.

Susan from Woodbridge, VA asks:

Why did VRE change the consist of Fredericksburg line trains from Bombardier to Gallery cars? Unless you are at least 6' tall, there is no place to store coats and bags because we can't reach the racks. There is no way to predetermine if there is a seat upstairs -- just hope there is a seat on the side you have chosen that morning. The coat hooks are only appropriate if you have a window seat.

VRE Management:

We were required by contract to return one Sounder consist to Seattle. A second consist will have to be returned by August 2005 which will have to be replaced by Gallery coaches. We are sad to see them go as well. We know that there are a number of people who liked them. Unfortunately, Seattle wanted them back.

Pat from Broadrun asks:

Not a question, but a compliment to the conductor on the 5:13 from Crystal City. Thank him for the courteous way in which he encourages the riders to quiet down in the regular ride cards. I made it a point to thank him at the end of my ride. Cheers! Jeers - to those particular riders and their snide comments about being reminded to think of the other passengers even if they are not in the quiet car. They the few were heard and not appreciated no respected. The majority of this large group respected the request.

VRE Management:

Thanks for the compliment. We'll make sure that we'll pass it along. We know that as trains get fuller, conflicts have arisen over "quietness." It is something that we will continue to work

on in our communications with riders.

Tom from Greenbelt asks:

When might VRE begin weekend and evening operation? I'd like to ride the system but seldom get the chance to do so during working hours.

VRE Management:

Currently, we have no plans to operate later evening or weekend service. Our MOU with CSX only permits us to a specific number of trains. Because of this, we have chosen to provide service to our core business, weekday service. We know that some would like later trains, but our ridership currently skews early and we need to put the trains where the people are. Once certain capital improvements are made to enhance track capacity, we will be able to add more trains. At that time, we will put them where the demand exists. This may be additional rush hour service, or it may be off peak service.

Susan from Woodbridge, VA asks:

Why do the engineers on trains 300 and 309 have to "race" into the stations and then try to stop the train in the shortest distance possible? Passengers waiting to board don't know where to cue for boarding, and those waiting to detrain are jerked forward and backward as the train stops. The latter is unsafe and painful to people who are forced to stand because seats are not available. (For example, trains 300/307 have 855 seats but over 900 midweek riders.)

VRE Management:

Much like driving, each engineer has their own style of stopping and starting. They are monitored on a regular basis by their service managers from Amtrak to ensure that they are not only following all rules but operating safely. I'll ask the service manager to review the operations of these two trains.

Scott from Spotsylvania VA asks:

Why has my ticket only been checked 6 times this year on my ride home?

VRE Management:

Please email gotrains with what trains you ride and I'll check into the situation. As an aside, we have recently completed a review of our trains to verify the fare evasion rate. Our analysis shows that it is within acceptable limits, but it could always be better. We will do another check later this year to

see if we have any improvement.

Pat from Broad Run asks:

When does the new parking lot open at Broad Run? It is looking good.

VRE Management:

The lot is very close to opening. In order to pass our final inspection, landscaping must be completed. We had hoped that we could open the lot, then landscape in the fall to take advantage of a better growing season, but Prince William County has requested that we complete planting now. Once this task is finished, the lot will be inspected and made available to the Broad Run riders. Right now I don't have a date when the planting will be done, but I expect it won't take too long. Thanks for the inquiry - we will be sure to keep you updated.

Marvin from Fredericksburg, Va asks:

When will the new fares be posted on the web site

VRE Management:

We will post them on Friday assuming both commissions approve the new fare structure.

Joe from fredericksburg, VA asks:

Can you tell me how the increase of ridership increases the operation cost when no enhancements or improvements have been added to VRE to facilitate the increase? In fact the increase in ridership should mean more revenue.

VRE Management:

In the past, our ridership growth far outpaced the rise in our operating expenses. This occurred when we had capacity to share. For several years, our ridership was growing an average of 18% per year. With our current capacity constraints, both in the parking lots and on the trains, our ridership, while still growing, has flattened out a bit. Ridership growth this fiscal year is about 5%. This is not enough to cover the rise in our operating expenses – mainly fuel, insurance, Amtrak contract fees. In addition, I have an agreement in principle with Amtrak to lease an additional 20 mid-day spaces in Washington effective July 1. If this contract change is approved, we will begin to lengthen a number of the existing trains and provide up 2400 more seats. I should know within 30 days if we will be able to do this.

David E. Cann from **Stafford, Virginia** asks:

Is there any possibility of limited Saturday service in the future? I know some commuter trains elsewhere do this, such as LA, but they are also in much larger cities as well.

VRE Management:

Looking into the future, I doubt we'll add any Saturday service. Our goal is to add additional service in the Monday to Friday time frame with an earlier train on the Fredericksburg line and a later train on the Manassas line and longer peak period trains.

Joe from **Locust Grove, VA** asks:

I fail to understand why VRE feels it must discriminate against those riders (through parking restrictions) who don't happen to live in a member county. And as a resident of Orange County I will never be. I suppose what really ticks me is the threat to further impose restrictions. This is in the light of VRE accepting state funding and as a taxpayer I feel that I should have the same access as any other taxpayer.

VRE Management:

We appreciate that you are frustrated with the change. However, The City of Fredericksburg has always had "Fredericksburg only" parking. This lot is now full and the City requested that more be made available. Since their local money is put towards VRE service, we opened an additional 38 spaces for Fredericksburg and other VRE member jurisdictions to park. Even with this change there are still 556 additional spaces available for everyone to park in. No state or federal dollars are used to pay for Lot C.

Kathleen from **Lorton, VA** asks:

Please let me know what VRE's plans are on to create a badly needed Kiss and Ride Lane at Lorton. Currently people line up in the bus lane. This isn't very good when a bus is trying to come through. I recommend taking out about 5 parallel parking spots on the other side of the bus lane and making this the kiss and ride lane.

VRE Management:

We were unaware that this is a problem. Fairfax County administers this lot and operates the bus service from there. We will forward your concern to them and let them take a look at what may be done.

Ben from Manassas asks:

I recently had a fall, and now I find myself needing to use the handicap spaces at the Old town Manassas station. I took an earlier train today, and the last handicap space as well. Do you know if I can park with the Handicap card in my window in non-commuter spaces? Yesterday I had to park in the overflow ABC lot and "hump" it to the station.

VRE Management:

Sorry to hear about your accident. I honestly don't know the answer to that. However, we will check with the City. Please email gotrains with your question and they will get back with you.

Art from Manassas, VA asks:

It looks like the rail ties for the Manassas line are in really bad shape, rotten and cracking - does CSX or NS have any plans on replacing or refurbishing the really bad ones?

VRE Management:

Please email us at gotrains and let us know the area of track that you are concerned about. We will forward that information on to NS or CSX, depending on where the location is.

Claude from Woodbridge asks:

I disagree with Dave from Woodbridge; I think the Bombardier are much more comfortable than the Kawasaki, and they also have lower doors to make it easier to enter/exit the train. Was any consideration given to purchasing the Bombardier type cars?

VRE Management:

We find that we have quite a dichotomy amongst our passengers when it comes to their favorite types of cars. Unfortunately, Bombardier did not bid on the cars either. Procurement law requires that we only consider companies that submit proposals and meet all of the specifications, but I am hopeful that with the interior improvements that you will be pleased with the new Gallery style cars.

Fred from asks:

Will the old FREs be usable until their expiration date?

VRE Management:

The short is no. Old FRCs without the box on the back of the ticket are not compatible with our TVMs. We are in the process of exchanging them out. See the VRE representative at the Meet the Management at your station and they will be happy to trade with you.

C. Lee Woodley from Nokesville, VA asks:

At BroadRun, why can't the trains be available to board early? For example, the 0545 train is usually parked there for us to board 15-20 minutes early. However, the 0505 train is almost never more than a minute or to early (prior to departure). Especially during bad weather, why can't the 505 and all BR trains board at least 10-15 minutes before departure time?

VRE Management:

We know that being able to see the train sitting in the yard can be a frustration, especially on cold and wet days. The Broad Run station is treated like any other station on our system. The crew is not required to pull the train into the station early as they have many "pre-flight" checks they need to make. That being said, we know that some crews arrive early and that this appreciated by the Broad Run passengers on those trains.

Pam from Rippon Va asks:

3rd time..I ride the 5pm out of Crystal City. This train is normally very crowded. Is there some rule/law about people standing in the isles? sitting/standing on the stairs? This is NOT queing, this is no where to sit.

VRE Management:

Third time is always the charm. But seriously, Fredericksburg line train #307 is the most popular train in our system and we know from first hand experience that significant crowding is the norm on this train. Our crews are the ones who make the final determination as to when a train is too crowded to allow more passengers on. While queuing and sitting on the stairs are not normally recommended, we know that passengers on this train have no other choice. As I mentioned earlier, the good news is that we soon hope to have more track space at our mid-day storage yard in D.C. Once complete, we will be able to lengthen some of our trains to 8 car sets. Train #307 among the first trains that will be lengthened.

Injured and Angry from Manassas, VA asks:

A few months ago, I took the 6:57 AM train from Manassas

Park. When I detrained in Crystal City, the quiet car did not make the platform. When I went to detrain, it was obvious that I had to 'jump' off the train and land on the rocks.

Unfortunately, I could not go back to the 'safe' car to detrain because I was one of the last individuals to leave the train and I felt the conductor would leave and not realize I was coming thru to the other car. First, I want to openly voice my anger because the incompetent, ignorant and non-caring conductor watched while I twisted my ankle. Not once did he come up to me to ask if I was OK. This is totally unacceptable and he must be reprimanded. I also can't seem to get a call back about my claim. Is this behavior acceptable, are you really interested in the safety of your passengers!???!!!!

VRE Management:

I'm sorry to hear that this happened. If you will contact us either by email at gotrains or call our main number at (703) 684-1001 and ask for Wendy, we will determine not only why you haven't received a call back but will look into the problem.

Mike from Spotsylvania, VA asks:

Back in January of this year train 310 arrived at the station from the train yard with a large area of graffiti painted on the station side of the train. With all the concern over security on our trains and public transportation I wonder how this could have happened. I always assumed that the trains at both ends of the line are in a secure area. Judging by the amount of graffiti on the cars that this meant that the cars were not secure for a good amount of time. What happened here and what is being done to make the layover yards and trains secure against this, and possibly a more serious threat, from happening again?

VRE Management:

In light of today's sense of security, this is a reasonable concern. We make every reasonable effort to make our yards and trains secure. Our yards are fenced with one point of entry. There is a security guard or mechanical staff on duty at all times with cameras providing back up support. The guard makes regular rounds, and has "interrupted" unauthorized people who have entered the yard. Although rare, whenever an incident like this occurs, we complete a thorough review and make adjustments accordingly. We have added razor wire to the fences and are in process of adding additional, high definition security cameras to both our yards.

Steve from Fredericksburg asks:

Currently, the Leeland Station parking lot exit is marked for one lane. Can you widen the parking lot exit so it has two exit lanes, one to turn right and the other left onto Leeland Rd? This will help to alleviate the lengthy backups.

VRE Management:

Whenever a significant number of people are trying to leave a parking lot, lengthy bottlenecks will occur. During the last on-line chat, I had mentioned that Supervisor Gibbons indicated that he would ask VDOT and the County about looking into making that happen. I will follow up with him to see where we are on this subject. Once I know more, I will have Customer Service put the information in a Train Talk message.

Tony from Spotsylvania asks:

Thank You! What for? For switching car V702 and V608 on train 300. The doors finally open in the morning and we no longer get soaked trying to get on the train. Squeaky wheel gets the grease. Thank You!

VRE Management:

Hi Mr. C! You're welcome. But I cannot be sure this is a permanent change. As you know, we often must run two cab cars together on some of the Kawasaki train sets. This means that not all of the doors will open. Train #304 and 309 are now running with two cab cars.

Syed from Fredericksburg asks:

I and many VRE users have experienced the VRE ticket vending machines at Fredericksburg continue to refuse accepting credit cards for purchase. Can someone come by and service these machines? Thanks

VRE Management:

We have heard this anecdotally about the Fredericksburg station and had our maintenance person check it out. We know that some of our TVMs are a bit picky. In our experience, changing the way that the credit card is removed has helped. Try pulling down on the card as you remove it. Often this helps the reader to recognized the card better.

Rick from Stafford, VA asks:

Can we get the conductors to enforce the quite car rules. Talking, cell phone use and snoring seem to be on the rise. When I remind others of this, I usually get a less than pleasant reaction.

VRE Management:

If we could figure out how to keep people from snoring and disturbing others, we could patent it and we'd never have another fare increase. :) Just kidding. Although we can't do anything about the snoring, we can continue to remind passengers about the rules of the quiet car. However, quiet does not mean complete silence as people are allowed to whisper. If you email us with what train you are on, we will be happy to speak with the service manager.

Phil from Burke, VA asks:

Was is it that only the in-bound trains are checked by the dogs? If indeed this is done for our safety, isn't our safety going home just as important?

VRE Management:

Certainly, your safety on the way home is just as important. With our limited resources, we are not able to check every train everyday. In fact, the inspections being carried out now are done by the Virginia State Police. We are grateful for their assistance. The information that we are working with suggests that if an attack were to occur, it would be in the morning and closer to the city center where it would disrupt the business day, do more damage and have more of a visual impact, creating more media coverage. The likelihood of an attack as the train enters the Manassas Park station, for instance, is far less likely than one on the Potomac River bridge or within D.C.

VRE Management:

These are great questions on a variety of topics. We have 15 minutes left. Keep these excellent questions coming. I will try to answer as many as I can.

Tony from Spotsylvania asks:

If you were to take any pre-submitted questions and answer them before the chat began, placing them at the beginning of the chat, it might save you some time and get more questions answered.

VRE Management:

I do look at the presubmitted questions ahead of time and am able to answer some in advance. In looking at most other forums and on line chats, they are able to handle between 20 and 30 questions in an hour, we do upwards of forty. Without doing some advance work, we wouldn't be able to answer 40 in an hour.

Don from Manassas, Va asks:

You partially justify greater discounts for monthly and 5-day passes by saying it reduces the burden on the validation machines. At the same time, you seem practically obsessed about collecting the old FRCs to exchange them for tickets that have to be validated. Why? Seems to me nothing's better for a passenger and those delicate machines than having a ticket that doesn't require validation. Also, will the old FRCs still be good? I've only got 2, keep missing exchange opportunities and it'd be a pain for me and for you to do it by mail.

VRE Management:

You are correct. But, the FRC program is factored into our calculations. We continue to support validating FRC's because of the risk of ticket fraud. If unvalidated are not lifted and torn by the conductor on each trip, they may be used again. Consequently, the only way to guarantee that they are used once is to have them validated. When we do return to validating, the old FRC's will no longer be good and may be rejected by the validators. We are holding Meet the Managements at each station, so perhaps when we visit your station in the AM you can exchange there. A MTM schedule is on the website.

Chuck from Bumpass, VA asks:

Several months ago, you mentioned that you were in negotiations to provide hot spot wireless Internet access on-board the trains. What is the status of the negotiations and when can we expect Internet access to be implemented?

VRE Management:

I can't say when this will be a reality. Their antennae were too tall to pass through our tunnels. The company is looking at what can be done with their transmitters. Additionally, they are trying to figure out how to deal with the three "dead spots," where communications are difficult, on our line.

Sue from Woodbridge, VA asks:

Can you give us some idea of how the interior design of the new Gallery cars will differ from those now in service?

VRE Management:

We are paying special attention the interiors of these new cars. The overall design of single seats on the top and double

seats on the bottom will remain. However, the seats on the top will all be facing the same direction. The seats on the bottom will be much more comfortable than the current seats. The windows will be larger and the lighting better. While not luxurious, I expect you'll be pleased.

Mike from Spotsylvania asks:

As a Spotsylvania COunty resident, I did not appreciate VRE's blackmail, disingenuous pressure and other lowball tactics pandering to the people in Fredericksburg. I pay the same tax on the gas I buy in Fredericksburg as they do. It is not like they are being forced to work off the VRE tax in a forced labor camp. By your own admission, part of the problem in Fredericksburg is that we are a majority of the riders. You are denigrating a majority of your CUSTOMERS. Think about that. I hope we join the VRE, but I would almost like to see Spotsy send you a message about divide and conquer politics.

VRE Management:

The change in Fredericksburg was not done as a punishment or done to send any messages. On the Spotsy topic, we have been working with them and other counties in hopes that they would become members of the VRE group. We are pleased by Spotsylvania's recent decisions. Spotsylvania isn't the only jurisdiction looking at making this change. There are at least two other counties that seriously considering VRE membership. We are hopeful that soon we can welcome more jurisdictions into the VRE fold and stop having to discuss anything about being members versus non-members.

Emily from Culpeper, VA asks:

Are there any plans for extending the Manassas line to Bealeton or Brandy Station? and if so, what is the time frame for this? I think it would be WONDERFUL!

VRE Management:

Right now there are no solid plans to extend to Bealeton. We have been asked by the State legislature to produce a report on what it would take to extend service to Gainesville/Haymarket. This report will be complete in Winter 2006 and will detail all the costs and infrastructure requirements to expand. Bealeton is in our long-term strategic plan, but no plan is developed to move it forward at this time. In addition, Fauquier also has to join one of our parent commissions.

Rose from Triangle, VA asks:

After the completion of the Quantico Station will there be a vendor to sell VRE tickets? Please, please, please. Thank you and have a great day. Rose

VRE Management:

We are happy to report that the Quantico Station will be open to the public on or about May 23. We are awaiting delivery of new doors and our final inspection. There is a space inside the station for a ticket vendor. We are currently advertising for a company to sell tickets. As of yet we do not have any takers, but we are looking...

Darren from Manassas, VA asks:

When the trains are leaving from DC in the evening all the seats are facing backwards. Can VRE flip the seats before boarding so the whole train is not seating in reverse. I feel like a kid seating in the back of a stationwagon.

VRE Management:

It is my understanding that the seats are positioned to face the middle of the car (where the vestibule is). Those riding in the southern section of the car face backwards in the evening and those in the northern section face backwards in the mornings. If you would like, you can flip your seat to face your preferred direction.

Dan from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

I work a flex schedule and have noticed some trains are more crowded than others. Could you post or list the average riders on each train?

VRE Management:

We do! (-: Visit <http://www.vre.org/service/consist.htm>. There is a list of what equipment operates on what train. We also list the current midweek ridership (tue-thu) for each run.

Tony from Spotsylvania asks:

With the recent sway of Spotsylvania in the newspaper for the VRE, if VRE were to put some form letters on their website of what to request and the people in Spotsylvania to send these to (email, addresses, phone numbers) we could probably put enough pressure on the board to get this thru. Our Union at work does it for congressional support - surely VRE can do this for more revenue? How about it? It's a two way street - VRE does half the work and we (the riders) can carry the torch

forward. Meet us halfway!

VRE Management:

Spotsylvania is the closest it has ever been to making a decision about VRE. In the past, they have never publicly deliberated over the choice to join PRTC and provide subsidies to VRE. I have been working with members of the Spotsylvania Board of Supervisors on the importance of VRE in their county. I believe that they are actively and sincerely exploring this issue and am hopeful that we can alleviate any remaining concerns that they have. In the meanwhile, if you feel strongly, we encourage our passengers to contact their elected officials. However, because we cannot directly ask or provide form letters as we are not permitted to lobby.

Mike from Woodbridge, VA asks:

It creates confusion when the Union Station stop is referred to as "Downtown" or "DC". L'Enfant is also in the downtown, DC area. This is particularly confusing so for new riders. Can VRE staff start referring to Union Station as "Union Station?"

VRE Management:

Thanks for letting us know, but I am not sure if you are talking about our conductors or VRE communications. Please email gotrains with your specifics and we will look into it.

VRE Management:

My computer tells me that it is 1:00p and time for us to finish another chat. I really enjoy all of the questions that everyone submits. I like that you are not afraid to ask me anything! Let's meet again here next month. Same bat time - same bat channel. (Of course, now I have dated myself!) Thanks and have a great day. Dale
