

# Virginia Railway Express

## Let's Talk!

The next VRE online forum will start on Wednesday, November 2nd at 12 noon.



There are currently 111 questions waiting to be answered.

### **VRE Management:**

The time is 12:00 noon. It is time once again to begin another on-line forum. I see from the queue that we have a lot of questions pending already and I must say I am happy that our chats have become so popular and useful to our riders.

With that being said, I am ready to get going with our first question.

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**Jon** from **Bristow, VA** asks:

Are there any plans to expand parking at the Broad Run/Airport station?

### **VRE Management:**

We are planning to open an additional 120 parking spaces where the barn used to be near the train yard. I expect that it will be complete by January. Even with that, we know that, especially since it is an end of the line station, parking will always be tight at this station.

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**Esther** from **Fredericksburg** asks:

What, if any, voter education initiatives has the VRE undertaken in preparation for the Spotsylvania County referendum vote next week?

### **VRE Management:**

We have highlighted the referendum in the last two issues of the VRE Update – the most recent one was this morning. Unfortunately, it is a fine line between educating and lobbying. While we are permitted to do the first, we are not permitted to lobby.

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**Joyce** from **Fredericksburg, VA** asks:

When are fares being increased?

### **VRE Management:**

At this time, we are looking to reduce our spending rather than have a mid-fiscal year fare increase. Looking ahead, it may be necessary to raise fares again with the new fiscal year in July. We will be sure to let riders know as the fiscal year 2007 budget develops.

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**ron** from **fairfax,va** asks:

when will we have an expanded TLC card to cover Metro trains and Buses? or when will the region develop 1 card for all regional transportation needs?

### **VRE Management:**

There is an initiative to have a regional fare collection system. VRE has been involved in the planning for this for the last several years. With so many different transit agencies, it has been a real challenge. In the meanwhile, your VRE ticket allows free transfer to OmniRide, OmniLink, Metrobus, and Fairfax Connector. With a TLC, you can also use Metrorail.

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**David from Lorton, VA** asks:

Is a record of the on-time performance of each train maintained and available on the VRE web-site for public viewing? If not, I think such a record should be made available to the general public to provide an indication of the reliability of each train's schedule.

**VRE Management:**

We do post our performance measures on our website at [http://www.vre.org/about/performance\\_measures.htm](http://www.vre.org/about/performance_measures.htm). While we track our on-time performance by train daily, the aggregate information is posted on our website: overall OTP, Fredericksburg line OTP, and Manassas line OTP.

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**Alex from Manassas, Virginia** asks:

What is up with the freight train that periodically stops along the Observation/Gateway Road Crossing at the Broad Run Airport?

**VRE Management:**

Norfolk Southern's crew base is located in Bristow. When a train stops to be "re-crewed," it blocks the road in this area. Because they recently built this new crew base (it used to be closer to Manassas and caused even bigger traffic problems there), we do not foresee a change in this.

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**Brenda from Fairfax, VA.** asks:

Why are the trees that grow along the train track destroyed, what appears to me, so violently? Why is this necessary?

**VRE Management:**

Our host railroads routinely trim the vegetation along the tracks. This is done to prevent the trees from getting too close and obstructing the engineers' views of the signals and other track conditions. With thousands of miles of tracks, they use a machine that rolls along the tracks and cuts down everything that is in reach. While this may seem brutal, it is the most efficient means for them to do so.

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**vincent from Burke Ctr** asks:

Train 324 is filled after Burke Ctr everyday except for a Friday before a holiday, can't you add an additional car? Folks who get on after Burke rarely find a seat.

**VRE Management:**

The good news is this train and its accompanying afternoon train (333) are next in line to receive an additional car. At this point, I don't have a firm date on when this will be. Once the equipment becomes available, it will be put in place.

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**Michael from Woodbridge, Va** asks:

When are the morning trains arriving in Woodbridge going to be on time?

**VRE Management:**

I expect that on-time performance will improve once CSX finishes its tie replacement program.

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**James from Manassas, VA** asks:

When a train sits idling due to a delay or if it has mechanical problems, does it consume a lot of fuel?

**VRE Management:**

No more than if your car were to idle for a short period of time. The locomotive burns about 4 gallons per hour when idling.

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**Suzi from Fredericksburg, VA** asks:

Can't the train go a little quicker b/w stops? It seems that arriving at/departing from Quantico the train is moving 5 miles an hour.

**VRE Management:**

The signals indicate what speed the train must travel at. In addition, the train's size and weight plays a role in how fast it must decelerate and how fast it can accelerate. If you have concerns about a specific train, please email gotrains so I can look into it.

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**Dawn Roddy from Fairfax Station VA asks:**

How long will the backward slide of VRE services continue? I am a very long time rider and have watched the system grow from having a seat to myself (actually almost the complete car) to being lucky to get a seat. VRE expanded service provided more trains and now they are contracting service. What are we the customer to expect from VRE? We seem to be paying more to receive a great deal less.

**VRE Management:**

We are currently running at capacity. Most peak trains have some standees. I do not see that changing quickly in the future. We cannot add more trains until additional improvements are made to the railroad. In addition, we need more rail cars to provide increased service. We are working on both items. I don't see additional trains until 2008 at the earliest.

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**Tony from Spotsylvania asks:**

If Spotsy votes Yea on the bill, what time is the train expected to leave the new station? Although way off I'd like to know.

**VRE Management:**

I don't know. It will probably take 3 years to build a station. It is hard to tell so far in advance what the train schedule will be.

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**s from fredericksburg, va asks:**

I'm lost. So many cars on the Fredericksburg line have broken PA systems, especially train 302. Because it is so dark, there is no way of knowing which station we are at, especially if you are in the sleeping car. The conductors also must be mimes because there are never any manual announcements. It also would be nice to know why we are stopped on the tracks in the middle of nowhere. Communication is not one of the conductors strong suits. I'd rather have the drill sergeant barking orders than the silent treatment we get all the time.

**VRE Management:**

They should be making announcements. We will continue to forward these concerns on to Amtrak. Whenever you have a specific instance, please let us know so your eyes and ears can help us monitor this issue.

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**Mike from Annandale, VA asks:**

what's the status on the new rail cars?

**VRE Management:**

We are in the design process for the 11 cab cars. I am still looking to get the financing to exercise the option for the 50 additional cars by April 2006.

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**Ken from Stafford, VA asks:**

Can you explain why the switches north of Quantico sometimes have to be thrown by hand? Anytime that happens, we can count on a 15 – 30 minute delay. It only seems to happen on southbound trains. Thanks

**VRE Management:**

The control wiring for these switches is in need of replacement and will be done in one year with the completion of the Quantico bridge. In the meantime, I will ask CSX to keep a closer eye on this situation.

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**Larry from Fredericksburg** asks:

Have you folks considered opening a coffee shop at the Fredericksburg station?

**VRE Management:**

The station is owned by CSX and maintained by the City. There has been some thought to having a coffee shop there, but there are no supporting utilities at the station (mostly water). The cost of providing the necessary security and utilities is cost prohibitive.

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**Elizabeth from Fredericksburg, VA** asks:

What are you doing to alleviate the rat problem at L'Enfant Station? They were there in September and now they are back again. They are too close for comfort.

**VRE Management:**

I am aware of the "small forces" that find our platform attractive. I will let our facilities staff know that they have moved back into the neighborhood and need attention.

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**Maria from Fredericksburg, VA** asks:

When is the 30 minute late rule been reinstated?

**VRE Management:**

We will start handing out FRCs for delays that are 30 minutes or more once the CSX tie replacement work is complete.

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**Bob from Spotsylvania** asks:

With the ongoing delays and service problems you are already experiencing on the Fredericksburg side, why should votes support expansion? This would only serve to extend you operations area and the potential for problems.

**VRE Management:**

Adding service to Spotsylvania (near our Crossroads yard) will simply add passengers to a route that our trains are already running.

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**Andy from Alexandria, VA** asks:

With the termination of train 334/323, do you plan to use the extra cars to alleviate the crowding on other trains?

**VRE Management:**

Not directly. This train set is already used for train #326 in the morning and #329 in the evening. We won't be able to move these cars. However, as we continue to receive more Gallery cars, we will place them according to our ridership demand.

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**John from Manassas Park** asks:

Why does Manassas line end up with the cattle cars and FBG line continues to get good newer sets of rail cars? Also - what are steps being taken to alleviate parking place shortages in Manassas Park? It is almost impossible to find parking spot to take the last morning train out.

**VRE Management:**

We do not intend to show favoritism to give one line priority over another. We continue to move train sets around to accommodate passengers and schedules. We understand that a lot of people don't like the Gallery cars and are actively looking for funds to procure new cars.

As for parking, at this point there are no plans to increase parking at Manassas Park. However, improvements to Manassas and Burke are planned. These improvements should alleviate some of the crowding at Manassas Park.

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**Jean from Fredericksburg, VA** asks:

Why did train 311 experience another time change?

**VRE Management:**

We were experiencing conflicts between train Fredericksburg line trains #311 and #313 and Manassas line #335 and Amtrak #93 and Amtrak #19. The schedule change should alleviate some the delays associated with these conflicts.

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**Brec from Stafford VA** asks:

What was the "problem" we in Train #311 encountered last night? We were near the Quantico power plant when the train slowed to a halt. The conductor was polite, but evasive in the reason. Hoping to find out "what was fixed".

**VRE Management:**

CSX experienced a fire on a freight train near Arkendale. Once the fire was put out, we were permitted to resume. (It was their orange juice train, anyone interested in some toasty oranges?)

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**Tater from Fredericksburg, VA** asks:

When is there going to be some cleaning of the windows on train 301? I have had to take this train, and get a headache – the windows are filthy and all it would take would be a good cleaning!

**VRE Management:**

I agree. I'll take a look at why they are not as clean as they should be.

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**Mike from Manassas** asks:

I am thankful for the VRE service to DC. I like everything about it except the smoking at the stations while waiting for the train.

**VRE Management:**

Thank you. It is nice to hear positive comments. Unfortunately, there is nothing I can do about the smoking.

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**Robert from Manassas, VA** asks:

Are you still monitoring security as closely these days as you seemed to be a few months ago? And, I just wanted to praise VRE for the good job that you do considering all of the obsticals that you have to overcome. I'd rather ride the train than drive the roads.

**VRE Management:**

We are negotiating with the Virginia State Police for a long term detection dog program for VRE's trains and stations.

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**kirk from stafford, va** asks:

are the dollars that have been authorized from the recent transportation bill going to be spent on rail cars or new "3rd rail" tracks? is there a planned rollout posted to the VRE website?

**VRE Management:**

While we are mentioned in the recent Federal transportation bill, lawmakers did not specifically earmark any funds for VRE. At this time, it is unclear how much money we will receive. Once we have more information, we will be sure to let our riders know what the plans for the money are. Our first goal is to get enough funding to exercise the an option for 50 additional new rail cars.

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**Hammer from Fredericksburg** asks:

any chance of a double decker parking lot at Leeland station [as opposed to moving laterally on each progressive expansion]. The walk from the back of the lot to the platform can take several minutes now...

**VRE Management:**

We work with each local jurisdiction on the parking at the stations. Stafford County owns the parking lot at Leeland Road. Ultimately, the design of this lot and any future plans are up to them.

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**Michele from Burke, VA asks:**

In this morning's Virginia Railway Express Update, I read that VRE will be eliminating service the Friday after Thanksgiving. I was unaware of this when I purchased my monthly pass and am now wondering if the Metro option could be offered for that day.

**VRE Management:**

I am glad to hear that you are reading our newsletter. :) The question has been asked by several people, would we/could we open the Metro option. It is under consideration. I should make a decision on this shortly.

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**Karen from Manassas, VA asks:**

What are you doing to fix the diesel engines that consistently break down?! I am tired of being late to work and late getting home. My boss and family are also quite unhappy. Last night, train 333 broke down due to an engine malfunction. Yet, you put it back in service this morning on train 324! This keeps happening. There are also engine problems routinely on train 328 and 330. What actions are you taking to fix these and remain true to your on time commitment to passengers?

**VRE Management:**

I agree with you. We are being "nickel and dimed" by minor problems with our diesel main engines or HEP units. I am planning to have an extensive review made of our locomotive fleet and maintenance practices to see if we can improve the reliability.

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**Diane from Woodbridge, VA asks:**

Any plans to fix the broken cup holders and wash the windows on train 309?

**VRE Management:**

The current design of the cup holders, while convenient, was not strong enough for commercial use. We have found a more industrial strength model that we will use in our new 11 cab cars and retrofit in our existing fleet.

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**Harry from Occoquan, VA asks:**

What's with the surly conductors? A fellow passenger (new rider) was asked on October 31 train 300 to leave and she disembarked the train at Lorton rather than be given a summons (her preference) for erroneously riding on a monthly pass for November. Shouldn't the conductor have advised her to purchase a roundtrip ticket for Monday?

**VRE Management:**

We believe that we have spoken with the passenger you mention. With the increase in fares this summer, we received many comments from passengers that not everyone was paying their "fair" share. As a result, I asked our crews to step up their ticket checks. Because of the number of comments like yours, I know that they have done this. This is one of the hardest parts of their job. No one likes to be the bad guy and it gets hard for them to tell who is "working" the system and who has a legitimate issue. When we do get complaints, we ask Amtrak to talk with the conductor to find better ways to handle the situation.

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**Larry Box from Fredericksburg, VA asks:**

Why can't you provide something other than the current "cattle" car for use as a quiet car? This is the third time I've submitted this question. No answer so far.

**VRE Management:**

Each train is assigned a consist according to its ridership patterns. We know that the Gallery cars are not the favorite of many, but they provide the necessary seats. The quiet car was positioned on the car next to the locomotive for two reasons. First, it is an easily identifiable location. Second, the northernmost car on most train sets is the only one that is accessible to passengers who need the wheelchair lift. We did not feel that it would be fair to further limit the actions of those persons who only had the one car to use.

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**Steve from Warrenton VA** asks:

What is the current status of the issue of extending VRE into Fauquier County since VRE made a presentation to the Board of Supervisors earlier this year and our local papers reported that for the first time a majority, 3 out of 5, of the Supervisors support extension of VRE. I believe that the surveys showing that only 200 people from Fauquier use the VRE is a significant underestimate based on random checks of windshield stickers in the Broad Run parking lot. I have contacted each of our Supervisors urging them to support or thanking them for supporting VRE. What else do you recommend?

**VRE Management:**

Fauquier County appears to be interested in joining VRE. I think a deal could be made by the end of the year. However, service will not be extended into Fauquier in the near future. We are concentrating on extensions into Spotsylvania (if the referendum passes) and towards Gainesville/Haymarket because of the potential for greater demand in those corridors.

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**ML from Fredericksburg, VA** asks:

Why don't the conductors tell riders who take up two seats with their purses/backpacks/etc. to move their belongings so that others can sit down? When I asked this question in the past I was told that no one was standing, therefore, there was no need for the seat. But, even when there are standing customers the conductors do nothing to help out the situation.

**VRE Management:**

Please send an email to gotrains and let me know which train and conductor you are seeing this with. I will speak to Amtrak management to ensure that all seats are made available to paying passengers.

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**Ashok from Lorton, Virginia** asks:

There are no trains to Washington after 8:35 AM from Lorton. If i have to go late on some day to work, if i am holding a monthly pass, what are my options?

**VRE Management:**

Fairfax Connector provides service between Lorton and Franconia/Springfield. You can use your VRE ticket to ride Fairfax Connector. Visit their website at [www.fairfaxconnector.com](http://www.fairfaxconnector.com) for schedule information.

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**Jan from Stafford, VA** asks:

day after thanksgiving should be on S schedule. No other trains in large cities have no service on days after holidays. The traffic from holiday people will make commuting difficult and we should'nt have to drive. Why don't you take the \$36,000 out of your pay or layoff one of your employees. They don't work that hard anyway.

**VRE Management:**

I know that this was not a popular decision. VRE has a staff of 34. The remaining "VRE employees," maintenance crews on the trains and at the stations, conductors and engineers, are all contracted. In response to the budget concerns, I cut 10 positions from our Amtrak force, half of those were car cleaners. The other 5 were from a variety of duplicative mechanical positions.

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**John from Bristow, VA** asks:

With the justifiable cancellation of the late morning Manassas train, has VRE considered acquiring a single car self-contained train that could provide service at other than peak commuting times? While it doesn't happen often to me, late morning and mid-afternoon rides would be a welcome service. John Hammang

**VRE Management:**

John, I know that, even though the daily numbers were low, that there are a lot of people who used the mid-morning Manassas line train. However, the cost savings associated with this comes from a number of sources, including crews, fuel, and track access. Because this train set starts its morning as train #326 and returns to Broad Run, a smaller train set is not an option.

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**Frank from Woodbridge, VA** asks:

After riding the VRE for ten years, I recently switched to the bus, largely because of the step-up charge for riding Amtrak. Although I understand the rationale for the charge, the Amtrak schedule was the one most convenient for me. Do you have an estimate for how many other people quit taking the train due to the step-up charge?

**VRE Management:**

We did recently have a joint survey with Amtrak that had an independent consultant count the number of VRE passengers on their trains. It has dropped. However, Amtrak has been hit by the same service issues that we have had. It is difficult to tell exactly how many have stopped riding as a result of the Step-Up and how many have stopped riding as a result of the service issues.

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**Rich from Warrenton, VA** asks:

Thank you for offering this forum to bring valid questions to a quick resolution. Filtering the redundancies (which can be looked up in the archives) and the venting (which is unnecessary, as I am sure you're doing the best you can w/ the resources you have). Have you determined the cause of this mornings delays on #324?

**VRE Management:**

We have not received a clear cause of the delays to 324 this morning. When we know more, we will let you know.

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**Lena from Manassas, VA** asks:

Hi! Why is there not any security at the Manassas Station or at any of the parking lots? From what I have seen there is some type (local police or security officer) of security at every other station and since Manassas has a history of crime I would think that station and it lots would be a priority. Thanks!

**VRE Management:**

VRE has a close working relationship of Chief John Skinner of the Manassas PD. His officers provide excellent patrol in and around VRE lots and the station.

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**Kraig from Manassas, VA** asks:

Will VRE ever get rid of the cars with the knee-to-knee seats? (The white, green and blue cars) These cars are very uncomfortable. Don't know if VRE had anything to do with the Manassas Drive repairs. If so, a big THANKS to VRE!

**VRE Management:**

We have heard from all of you that the knee to knee seating, where you get up close and personal with your fellow riders, is not to your liking. In the design of the new equipment, we have removed the majority of face to face seating. While the new equipment is going to be made in the same style of the current Gallery cars, we are taking great pains to improve the interior amenities so that they more closely reflect the style that our riders deserve and are accustomed to.

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**Sharon from Stafford, VA** asks:

Any plans to increase parking at Leeland? Is there an timeline for the light installation at Leeland/Deacon Road? Thanks!

**VRE Management:**

In the next issue of Update, there will be an article on plans for the Leeland station parking. I can't get into all of the nuances here as we don't have all of the details yet.

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**PETE from FALMOUTH** asks:

THE FREDERICKSBURG LINE BRIDGE BEING BUILD, WHEN WILL IT BE READY?

**VRE Management:**

I assume that you are referring to the Quantico bridge. It is expected to be operational in Spring 2007. At this time, the project is "on track," so to speak.

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**S. Luke** from **Stafford, VA** asks:

There should be some type of "inconvenience surcharge" that passengers can levy against VRE. For example, if I were to take a taxi from Alexandria to McLean and it breaks down in Arlington, it's highly unlikely I'd give the guy a tip...in fact he'd probably insist I don't pay him as a show of respect for my inconvenience. VRE should do the same...like today on the Fredericksburg line. When can you implement this?

**VRE Management:**

Our version of this is the Free Ride Certificate, a ticket good for one-way travel on our system. Essentially, this is a refund on an unsatisfactory trip. At this time, it is handed out for any delay of 60 minutes or more. When CSX finishes its track work, we will return to our normal time frame of 30 minutes.

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**VRE Management:**

Well, I see I've run over my time. We received over 150 questions, all excellent and worthy of an answer. I just wish I could have answered every one. Our next session is on Wednesday, December 7. I look forward to talking with you again.

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