

Virginia Railway Express

Feedback

Let's Talk

Our next on-line forum is scheduled to be held on Wednesday, October 5 from 12:00n until 1:00p.

**VRE Management:**

Good afternoon! Welcome back to our on-line forum. After a brief summer hiatus, we are back, ready to take your questions.

VRE Management:

A couple of opening comments. We know it is tough to be a loyal VRE passenger right now. Between the track work and other delays our OTP has dipped to their lowest level in 8 years. One of the big questions I am hearing is "What is VRE doing with CSX to make things better?" We have been discussing our lack of OTP with CSX and state officials and the result has been some movement that we see as positive. First, they have assigned a high level staff person who reports directly to the CSX Chief Operating Officer to work with VRE and Amtrak on Virginia issues. This change means that we have someone who works with us in our territory who is focused on keeping VRE trains on time. This is a positive move that we hope will bring better OTP to our service.

VRE Management:

Additionally, we are hopeful that the ongoing tie replacement will lessen the nuisance delays that we have experienced. The small slow orders for "track" should go away when this is done. While we can't promise that this work will eliminate the Heat Orders, we are lobbying CSX hard to take a look at this practice and see if they can eliminate or moderate it.

VRE Management:

Speaking of tie work, phase two of the work, when they move down to Featherstone, will commence in the next few weeks. Look for important communications on this early next week. Another topic that is near and dear to everyone is the FRC policy. We moved it to one hour to accommodate expected delays as a result of track work. Naturally, the question is if the delay isn't due to track work, shouldn't the FRC half hour policy apply? Because of our experience with the Arkendale crossover on the Fredericksburg line and the Norfolk Southern tie replacement, we were naturally concerned about the effects of the CSX tie replacement. This decision was made in the interest of remaining financially responsible. This is especially important at a time when insurance and fuel costs continue to rise and additional funds are needed to sustain the same level of service for our customers.

VRE Management:

Certainly, the decision to extend the required time regardless of delay was a difficult one to make. Consider the following scenario, train A is delayed as a result of the tie replacement by more than 30 minutes but less than 60 minutes. On the same day, train B is delayed as a result of a switch problem on the tracks, not related to the tie replacement and is also more than 30 minutes late but less than 60 minutes. In this situation, if we were to state that 60 minute mark was in effect for only tie replacement related issues, one group would receive FRCs and another would not. In addition, often, our delays have multiple causes. Consider two trains that are both delayed by 30 minutes due to the tie replacement, but train A is also delayed 30 minutes because of a switch problem on the tracks, not related to the tie replacement. Should train A receive FRCs? Right now we plan to remain at one hour for the duration of the track work and then will revert back to the former policy.

VRE Management:

And, now let's get to your questions.

Doug from Clifton, VA asks:

Why has the Rail Time Update Link on the VRE website been down for so long. I use this feature frequently, and with all the track work going on, it would be helpful if you could bring this link back up. Thanks

VRE Management:

We understand that many of our passengers rely on Rail Time for information on their commute. The problem had been an intermittent one. We are happy to report that we think we may have solved the problem as Rail Time is currently operational.

Cathy from Manassas Park, VA asks:

What is going on with the building of the concrete platform in M.P., there doesn't seem to be any signs of activity for about 3 weeks.

VRE Management:

When work began on the permanent platform at Manassas Park, we discovered some fiber optic cables that had been buried there. Work has temporarily been stopped until revised plans can be made that will take these cables into account.

Len from Burke VA asks:

Neighborhood shuttle busses are a great idea. Any chance of adding more busses or expanding routes at Burke? I don't ride them because they don't come close enough to my house. More shuttle capacity will be important when construction begins on the new garage. Thanks!

VRE Management:

The Burke Centre EZ Bus is a program that is funded by the Commonwealth through Fairfax County. They are ultimately responsible for the routes. The routes were purposefully created so that time on the bus would be minimized. Studies have shown that longer bus times result in lower use. As with everything, we will continue to monitor this program and see how it can be improved.

Clyde from Fredericksburg asks:

VRE should get rid of the FRCs unless the delay is due to VRE equipment/crew failure. Why should VRE subsidize individual riders when the fault lies with mother nature, CSX track issues, or the lack of action by the Jacksonville dispatcher? This subsidy comes either from taxpayer dollars or from fare increases on ridership. Your bottomline would be helped out if you did that, only the greedy really think they should get an FRC when VRE is not at fault.

VRE Management:

There are some who agree with your position. However, we believe that the FRC program creates more good will than any other program that we have. At this time, we believe that it is worth the cost. As we look at our budget every year, this program continues to receive more scrutiny.

Dwight from Stafford, VA asks:

I listen to WTOP and other traffic reports for commuting info each morning. VRE seems to only occasionally provide train status to radio stations. For instance, two weeks ago, VRE reduced the Fredericksburg line to the "S" schedule (even Amtrak's #84 was canceled) yet there was no mention of this on WTOP and I found out only after I arrived at the station at 7:10am. How can VRE provide timely information to metro traffic reports each morning on the status of it's trains.

VRE Management:

VRE does provide regular updates to WTOP, Metro Traffic and a variety of other media outlets. Some days, there are significant delays on the highways as well. Traffic reporters are faced with the tough position of reporting on a wide variety of commuting issues and may not be able to report everything that has been brought to their attention.

Patrick from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

After sitting 4 1/2 hours on a train from L'Enfant to Fredericksburg I finally came to the sad conclusion that VRE is no longer a viable option for commuting. The system is unreliable and far too expensive for anything other than a last resort. I fully understand that the problem is mostly due to CSX issues, but that doesn't change the fact that riders can't rely on arriving at work on time on any given day. My solution was to drive over to RT 17 and join the slug line. I'm happy to say that I leave the lot later, and arrive to work far earlier each day than I did riding the train, and it's FREE! It's a sad commentary on the state of a public transportation system when you can do better by essentially hitchhiking.

VRE Management:

We are sorry to hear that we have lost you as a rider. There is no doubt that this has been a difficult summer for us. Once the tie replacement program is complete, we believe that our Fredericksburg line passengers will see a marked improvement in on-time performance. When that happens, we hope you will give us another chance.

David from Lorton, VA asks:

The current fare for a rider traveling between Fredericksburg (zone 9) and Springfield (zone 3) is \$5.25, which is the same fare as a passenger traveling between Lorton (zone 4) and Alexandria (zone 2). Why should a rider going from zone 4 to zone 2 pay the same fare as a rider going from zone 9 to zone 3? This seems a bit inequitable.

VRE Management:

Our fares are based on zones. In that fare structure, there is an outer zone discount designed to encourage those with shorter commutes to consider VRE (from outer zone to outer zone). Franconia/Springfield on the Fredericksburg line and Backlick Road on the Manassas line are part of the "outer zones." Because a passenger from Lorton to Alexandria is riding in towards a peak inner zone, the cost is more.

Bo from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

I'm very worried about the tie replacement work scheduled by CSX to begin at 7pm on certain weekdays in the near future. Hundreds of riders use #313 and Amtrak 85 every night, and it sounds like they ALL will be severely and adversely impacted by this. From my point of view, that's not really acceptable. Why can't the work start later in the evening? Or...why can't the workers plan for these two trains (at least one of them) and keep the delays to a bare minimum? I expect VRE management to be working with CSX and advocating for me and my fellow "late train passengers" here.

VRE Management:

I have learned over the years that the majority of riders are more concerned about getting to work on time. If the track work were to start later in the evening, it would have to end later in the morning. This would significantly affect our first train, which is the heaviest used morning train, and a domino affect could happen. In order to protect our morning service, I decided that it would be a better option to notify our passengers well in advance that train #313 that it would be cancelled. While this will affect approximately 260 of our passengers, there are other options. Amtrak 85 will continue to operate to its regular stops only and VRE riders will be allowed to use this train without a Step-Up ticket.

patricia from Burke Virginia asks:

What is the earliest time you post your early morning delays online. Often, I check at 5 am and nothing is posted, only to recheck before I leave the house at 6:30, and there is a delay. Is there anyway to firm up your mode of communication to us?

VRE Management:

Delays are announced as soon as we are aware of them. If we know in advance that there will be delays, we try to post it on the website as soon as we know. If trains begin to experience delays en route, they will not be posted to the website unless it becomes a significant delay affecting more than one train.

Brian from Bristow, VA asks:

The number of VRE riders has skyrocketed along with the cost of gas, which is a good thing for energy

conservation and reducing air pollution. However, it has also led to large numbers of illegally parked cars at Broad Run that make it extremely difficult to navigate the parking lot. Will the various law enforcement agencies responsible for safety in VRE parking lots be asked to step up their enforcement of traffic regulations?

VRE Management:

Every year, we experience a slight dip in ridership over the summer which is followed by a surge in ridership in September. The recent gas prices may bring even more passengers to our trains this year. This makes crowding in our parking lots difficult. We must balance the desire to allow as many people to park as possible with the need for public safety. We have worked with the local police and asked that they ticket on egregious offenders. The good news is that a new lot will be opening by the end of the year 113 additional spaces at Broad Run.

Donna from Dumfries, va asks:

How is it we're subjected to equipment failure on Monday mornings like that which occurred this week? Does no one inspect the equipment over the weekend to make certain it is functioning properly and ready for Monday's commute? Wouldn't that be the smart and cost effective thing to do?

VRE Management:

Yes, equipment is inspected prior to the train leaving the yard. The issues on Monday were not detectable. #300's train had a sensor fail en route. The mechanic rode the train, but could not override the sensor. Hence, the total shutdown. The second one was the result of false brake failure readings. We traced this to the locomotive on the rear of the train. Only a master mechanic could have determined this problem and fixed it. Having this occur together on a Monday was absolutely the worst. I was severely disappointed in these developments. Although mechanical delays in total are down, when they occur it is a problem. We are committed to keeping the older equipment in as good a shape as possible to keep this to a minimum.

Tony from Spotsylvania asks:

What rights do we as passengers have when a ginormous 400lb+ passenger squeezes in a seat next to you, overlaps your leg with theirs and cuts off circulation or squishes you into the wall? Can we approach the conductor to have them moved? What about VREs response to complaints that people that have excessive body odor and stink up the cars? I would like to see a passenger bill of rights.

VRE Management:

By its very nature, it is difficult to police courtesy issues on public transportation. A certain amount of tolerance is necessary. While there are some who complain about passengers with excessive body odors, we also hear about people who spray on too much cologne and perfume. Should you find an issue that you feel needs more attention, feel free to discretely discuss it with your conductor or contact VRE customer service by email at gotrains@vre.org. In the past, we have sent VRE personnel onto trains to handle delicate matters such as these.

Robert from Haymarket, VA asks:

TVM reliability seems to be declining. Broad Run station rarely has all 3 TVMs working properly. Either 1 or more TVMs will not process all transactions, or 1 or more TVMs are not in service at all. What is being done to improve this? It makes for long lines typically on Monday mornings.

VRE Management:

To further improve the reliability of our fare collection machines, we had the vendor to hire a second maintenance technician. Between two people, they should be able to better maintain all of our units.

Rich from Warrenton, VA asks:

I recently moved to Fauquier County from Loudoun, and started using VRE on 1Sept. I have enjoyed the vast majority of aspects wrt my new commute on VRE. I was wondering if VRE was working with Prince William County to improve egress from Broad Run station during peak usage. Wait times while trying to leave the lot onto RT28 South from Piper Lane can be as long as 15minutes (approx), due to short light timing.

VRE Management:

This has been a long standing problem, especially as ridership has grown at Broad Run. We have worked hard to get the light installed at Piper Lane, but based on VDOT's recent assessment on the timing of the light, we do not expect them to adjust the timing in the near future. However, you can take Observation as an alternate.

Scott from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

Have you considered creating an express train on the Fredericksburg line. I ride train 300 and notice that the lions share of people get on at the first three stops. Could a slightly smaller train take all of those folks straight up to reduce the time for those who commute the longest?

VRE Management:

This has been a long standing concern. We know that a large number of riders would also like an earlier train on the Fredericksburg line around 4:45a (really early!). When we can add another train to the Fredericksburg line in 2008, we will consider an early express train at that time.

Joe from Centreville, VA asks:

How soon will it be until VRE receives its Sumitomo cars?

VRE Management:

The first 11 cab cars will arrive between December 2006 and February 2007.

James from Falmouth, VA asks:

Why do some conductors check tickets and others do not? Additionally, the conductors who do check do not bother to ask those with no visible ticket to display it. I thought all tickets were suppose to be out on display at all times ?

VRE Management:

All crews are required to make random ticket inspections on their trains. We are interested to hear when this does not happen. Please feel free to let us know by email which trains you perceive this to be a problem on. Additionally, we are soon to deploy mystery shoppers on all trains that will review not only on board performances but also equipment and platform issues. We expect that this will give us a lot of knowledge as we seek to standardize service.

Carol from Woodbridge asks:

Communication is a huge issue for the riders. Information regarding delays is made via email & the website WELL after the problems have been experienced. For example, the email from Wendy regarding the problems with train #300 this past Monday, 9/12, was sent at 6:08am. Since #300 is scheduled to depart Woodbridge at 5:53am, it seems the waiting passengers were aware of the delay before VRE & Wendy were. While waiting at the station that morning, the recorded announcements were often conflicting from one announcement to the next. When will communications improve????!

VRE Management:

I have taken many steps to improve comminucations, especially during the track work, including additional staff in the office earlier in the morning and conference calls with CSX every morning at 4:30a. With regards to Monday, what started as a routine maintenance issue that does not warrant a Train Talk ballooned into something more serious, hence the delay in Train Talk.

VRE Management:

As an aside, we are looking at ways for automatic delay notices to be sent to passengers' PDAs and pagers. This would mirror information that is given to the platforms. Getting two computer systems to work nicely together is the challenge. But we are confident that we will be able to introduce this by early next year.

VRE Management:

Still, our biggest problem is, once a train stops, estimating what the exact delay will be. What could be a 5 minute problem one day could very well be a 30 minute delay another day. I am finding that it takes 10 or more minutes to get an accurate assessment from on board personnel and/or mechanics. Once we know, we get the information out to you as quick as we can.

Mary from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

Can the first train from Fredericksburg leave earlier than 5:15 AM? Are they ever going to provide life jackets to rider who trains crosses over water?

VRE Management:

Life jackets? Not at this time.

Scott from Spotsylvania, VA asks:

Recently the 300 went down to a 7 car consist. Why doesn't VRE have an extra car, even a single decker, they could use as a spare?

VRE Management:

I am aware of it. I don't like it. In the future, we will put a spare in.

Anonymous from Bristow, VA asks:

Can you please address the difference between a quiet car and a silent car. I ride the non-quiet car for various reasons, but on occasion have found myself on one of the quiet cars. I respect the need or want of a quiet environment to work, read, or meditate. However, I find it quite silly that one cannot speak in a whisper or rattle a paper from time to time without receiving the knowing glare that you are not being silent. I find that our libraries are more lenient and tolerant than some of our fellow VRE quiet car riders. If these cars are suppose to be silent the signs should indicate such. It just appears that over time the riders of these cars have evolved their own rules and dictations how the cars should operate. Will VRE step in and clarify once and for all? Thank you.

VRE Management:

We understand that there are people who are over zealous in their pursuit of quiet. The policy on the quiet car is clearly posted on our website. We will pursue signage that details rights, rules, and responsibilities in the quiet car.

Scott from Washington, DC asks:

How badly have fuel prices affected your revenue and will this be one of the reasons given for the next fare increase? (By the way, the extra cars on the Manassas line trains I ride have made the trip much more comfortable. Thanks!)

VRE Management:

Fuel prices have significantly affected our operating costs. We are currently looking at a budget deficit of \$1.5 million and are considering options on how to fund that additional cost.

anthonywj from Lorton, VA asks:

Is there a way to pickup a few of the discarded railroad ties that are being replaced? I have a landscape project that could use them.

VRE Management:

You are not alone. I can't tell you the number of times people have asked us for the timbers. However, they belong to CSX and NS who have indicated that they do not make these available to the public for sale.

Kim from Lorton, VA asks:

FRCs: the ticket machines say not to validate them. The tickets say to validate them. Should FRCs be validated? Thanks.

VRE Management:

We will return to FRC validation on October 11 (the day after Columbus Day). The signs on the TVMs will be removed shortly.

Jean from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

Why is it taking so long to get parts for the air conditioning on the quiet car on 304/311?

VRE Management:

I don't know. I will have someone working on it this afternoon.

Don from Montclair, VA asks:

How are steel rails, each one-quarter mile long, transported to track sites?

VRE Management:

They are transported on special regular length rail cars.

Pat from Broad Run asks:

Congratulations to Al Calwise for his observation that I was in diabetic distress on two occasions about a month ago. An Air Force member also assisted me and made sure I got safely to my car. Another passenger helped Al to assist me aboard. Al even gave me his personal snack food to raise my sugar level.

VRE Management:

Al has been a VRE staple since our inception. It is not surprising that you received such excellent service from him. We will pass your kudos along. Also, to the Air Force person who helped you, whoever you are, thank you for taking the time to help another passenger who needed it. These stories are what make VRE passengers unique in the transit industry.

Vienna from Hanover, Virginia asks:

Why do you wait until Alexandria to bring the dogs on the train. Aren't you concern about the other 8 stops that has already been made? What are you looking for in Alexandria that you are not looking for during the entire route. Believe me the passengers feel no since of security by bringing the dogs on at three stops before the end of the line. They really thinks its a joke.

VRE Management:

State police and Prince William police dogs are brought on board in various locations. While you may not have seen them at your stop, puppies have sniffed bags at several VRE stations.

Aaron from Fredericksburg Virginia asks:

How often and how thoroughly are the VRE train cars cleaned? Many of the cars seem dirty to me. It would make the commute more comfortable if sanitation were not a concern. Thank You.

VRE Management:

I assume you are talking about the interior of the trains. They are required to be cleaned daily during the mid-day. In addition, we have recently hired a contractor to do "deep" cleaning of the interiors of all cars at least once a year. We will start that program shortly.

Rayzel from Woodbridge, VA asks:

Why is VRE anti-Baby Boomers? The platform for L'Enfant Plaza is at Virginia Ave and D Streets, DC has 3 long flights. I can hardly make it up to the platform with my arthritis and I am not the only baby boomer that is having this problem. Please DON'T mention that there is a walkway WAY over by the FAA. To get there requires walking even MORE blocks. I can hardly make it to Virginia Ave as I don't work near the FAA but towards the Capitol area. I think that I should be able to go to any side of the platform and get the VRE train without worrying if I am going to fall on the stairs. I'd like to also mention that the conductors on the train are very helpful.

VRE Management:

Well, I'm a baby boomer, too. We appreciate the issues, but unfortunately do not have a solution (elevator) in sight. The best we can offer is the ramp to the station.

Orville from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

Concerning the Leeland Rd commuter lot... why are some allowed to consistently park in the "Vender" spaces

with no apparent recourse? The local authorities will ticket if you are outside of the cross-hatched areas, but this vendor area appears to be "fair-game" and seems to be immune from enforcement.

VRE Management:

You are right. This weekend we will change the signage at Leeland to make that a legal space so that there is no further confusion.

Harley from Colonial Beach, VA asks:

Occasionally I purchase a Step-Up ticket at the TVM using my bank debit card. It will not accept the card if I indicate "debit" but takes it when I indicate "credit". What's up?

VRE Management:

The TVM should accept your debit card information. Please note the number of the machine and submit a TVM Information Form (on our website under feedback). I will have our fare collection contractor investigate the difficulty.

Barbara from Spotsylvania VA asks:

What is new on the Spotsylvania front? Is there still talk of a station in Spotsy?

VRE Management:

Spotsylvania will have a referendum in November. One of the referendum questions includes the funding and parking for a VRE station stop in Spotsylvania. A positive vote is critical for adding a station in Spotsylvania.

Brian from Stafford, VA asks:

Dude, when are you going to purchase some post Nixon-era locomotives? Is there a point in the life of a Locomotive when it becomes too costly to repair and makes economic sense to purchase newer equipment even if it is newer used equipment? The generator failed again on 302, and I was on 310 a couple weeks ago when we lost motive power. I also heard about Monday's disaster. Are there plans to upgrade these antiques?

VRE Management:

Dude, my highest priority now is acquiring 50 new rail cars. Your comments on the locomotives are welcome, but with limited funding my priority is on rail cars. We will have to continue to maintain the locomotives.

Charles from Manassas asks:

Occasionally I need to ride the mid-morning train (like I will tomorrow) but I know the Manassas Park lot will be full. Can you advise which station lots do not fill up and could this be posted and periodically updated on the web? Metro used to do this but I can't find theirs any more. Thanks.

VRE Management:

This information can be found on our website at <http://www.vre.org/about/performance/sld002.htm>. Currently, we have information through July and will post August's numbers on Friday.

Dan from Warrenton VA asks:

I have been a VRE rider for slightly more than 1 year. But a DC area commuter for more than 10. Even with the problems, my commutes on VRE are less stressful and more cost-effective than other modes of transportation. People are quick to point out problems, and often rightly so. I just wanted to say "thanks!"

VRE Management:

Thank you for the comment, but I am not happy with our current on-time performance and it needs to get better. Everyone at VRE is working to make that happen.

John from Rippon asks:

I assume you feel that these "Let's Talk" sessions are worthwhile, and in my opinion they certainly are a step in the right direction. Why don't you answer all of the questions that come in? I understand that time will only allow

so many to be answered in this manner, but why not record all of them and answer them over the next few days?

VRE Management:

We would love to be able to answer the more than 150 questions that we have received today. However, staff limitations (and sore fingers) prevent us from taking every single question every single time. Feel free to ask your question in person at any of the remaining Meet the Managements. The schedule can be found at <http://www.vre.org/feedback/mtm.htm>.

Frank from **Springfield** asks:

How about a space suit in case Martians take over the train?

VRE Management:

WOW! I think I'll end here. Our time is up for today.

VRE Management:

Thanks so much. As usual, we received more questions than we could answer. I know all of you have a lot of very legitimate concerns about on-time performance and the ongoing operations of VRE service. I think that after the tie program is complete we should see improvement across the board. Again, I appreciate your continued patronage of VRE service. Everyone here is working to improve the service, especially on-time performance.

VRE Management:

I will meet you again in the \"Chat House\" next month. Thanks again.

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