

# Virginia Railway Express

## Let's Talk!

The next VRE online forum will start on Wednesday, April 5th at 12 noon.



There are currently 51 questions waiting to be answered.

### **VRE Management:**

Good Afternoon! With Spring here and the cherry blossoms out, time is just flying by. It's hard to believe that it's April already, but hopefully we've put the cold weather behind us and can look forward to a nice Spring.

I know those of you on the Manassas Line had a tough time the other day. I will be happy to take questions on that and anything else that is on your mind.

Let's get started!

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### **Jorge from Burke, VA asks:**

Most cities only have one commuter rail service. Will MARC and VRE ever merge? I think this would be a good step for both agencies.

### **VRE Management:**

The difference between DC and most large cities is that it straddles two states. Each state provides its own transportation network. We are more similar to what has happened in New York where Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey all provide different transportation into the city.

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### **Kristina from Manassas, VA asks:**

Can we have a bake sale to raise money for new locomotives?

### **VRE Management:**

I wish it were that easy! New locomotives cost about \$2-4 million each. I don't think a bake sale would raise enough money.

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### **Steve from Wash., D.C. asks:**

Will VRE ever make a stop at Ft Belvoir? Right now, there are no HOV lanes dedicated to Belvoir, nor any Metro options. My understanding is that Belvoir is to make a major increase in population over the next few years, but right now you can only get there by driving alone on I95.

### **VRE Management:**

This is a hot topic in this area now. While they put the finishing touches on who goes where on the base, we are working closely with Fairfax County on how we might be part of the transportation solution. Right now, we don't have a firm plan, but as all of the aspects of this crystalize, we expect to be part of the transportation mix.

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### **Scott from Stafford, VA asks:**

Normally people are willing to pay for service, but after a year like last year how can you guys in good conscience continue to ask for fare increases? Aren't you worried you are pricing yourselves out of the transportation options market.

### **VRE Management:**

The balance between the cost of service and the value for service is a difficult one. VRE must meet its budget

obligations while maintaining the current level of service. Many years ago, VRE service was considered to be too high and we will carefully watch for fluctuations in ridership as we change fares. Unfortunately, we are dealing with substantial increases in diesel fuel, liability insurance and maintenance of old cars that we cannot mitigate which is causing our operating budget to grow faster than we had expected.

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**sheryl from manassas, va** asks:

Hi. I sent in a request for a New Rider's package about seven days ago but I still don't have it. How long does it usually take? I start riding on Monday. Thanks.

**VRE Management:**

I am sorry to hear that you have not received it. You can print a copy of it from our website. It is available from our website at <http://www.vre.org/service/newriderkit.pdf>.

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**Blevins from Stafford, VA** asks:

Why does all of VRE's equipment have a "V" in the number?

**VRE Management:**

Wehn VRE began service, Amtrak requested a letter differentiation in order to keep it separate from their equipment when they track the maintenance of our fleet.

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**Chuck from Bumpass, VA** asks:

No question here, just a statement of fact. VRE management uses this forum simply for lip service. You have NEVER provided feed back or follow up on the actions you claim you are taking or will take. You need a new section on the website with the results of promised follow up actions, if you really are carrying them out.

**VRE Management:**

Good point. We'll look into that possibility.

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**Davin from Woodbridge, VA** asks:

You say that your are rebuilding the Top Decks so that your locomotives are more reliable. What are "Top Decks"?

**VRE Management:**

A Top Deck overhaul replaces the power assemblies which include the cylinders, pistons, connecting rods and bearings.

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**Michele from Burke, VA** asks:

The parking lot at the Burke Center VRE station is in dire need of pothole repairs. This situation has continued to deteriorate over time with no end in sight. VRE must work diligently with Fairfax County to ensure that the parking lot is maintained in a timely manner.

**VRE Management:**

We have notified Fairfax County and we will work to get it done as quickly as possible.

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**Tom from Manassas, VA** asks:

Is there a way for someone to salvage some of the railroad ties that have been replaced during the tie replacement program over the past year? There are a number of places along the Manassas line where old ties are stacked and waiting for removal. Is there a number one can call to ask about their availability?

**VRE Management:**

Old rail ties are no longer available because of the types of chemicals that they use to preserve them.

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**Don from Manassas, Va.** asks:

The Examiner reported this morning that the Va. legislature passed a bill limiting VRE liability to \$250 mil by an apparently veto-proof margin. Assuming this becomes law, will you have less of a fare increase for us come July?

**VRE Management:**

No, not at this time. We currently carry \$250 million in liability insurance. Hopefully, the bill will limit the need for increasing levels of liability insurance in the future.

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**Joe** from asks:

Now that we have had a few months under the new era of the CSX commitment to improving its service to VRE are you seeing any of the benefits? It does seem that in the last month or so the on-time performance has improved on the Fredericksburg line. What do you expect will happen during the next coming months with the new round of line work that was announced today?

**VRE Management:**

On-time performance has improved. We continue to work with CSX for more improvement. Their commitment appears genuine. They plan to complete all of the necessary railroad maintenance overnight. This work should have minimal impact on VRE service.

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**Pete** from **Haymarket, VA** asks:

Are you going to be participating in the Manassas Railway Festival this year?

**VRE Management:**

We are in the process of working out the logistics with Historic Manassas and plan on being there this year.

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**Philip** from **Manassas, VA** asks:

Can we get wifi connections at the platforms (not on the trains).

**VRE Management:**

We don't plan on having wi-fi at the platforms which is why we have been looking for a solution to continuous service on board the trains.

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**John** from **Woodbridge** asks:

In point of fact, the train trip status map does not work consistently. Don't bother with the tap dance; we all know technology is really not our friend, and especially not VRE's. So, could you please put a link to the text-based status tracking list, i.e.: <http://www.vre.org/vremap/app?action=showstat> in the header of that page? Better yet, why not place that little table on your front page, in a frame that doesn't disappear. You have got to know that trip status is what all of us are interested in, far more than anything else on your site

**VRE Management:**

Yes, technology is not our friend! We are aware of the difficulties with the Rail Time system and were having difficulty diagnosing the exact cause. It turns out that the culprit was a two minute drift in the internal server clock. The server should sync up with USNO time and was not doing so successfully. We think that we have solved it now, but if you encounter problems, please email [gotrains](mailto:gotrains) and let us know right away.

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**Donna** from **Dale City, VA** asks:

When VRE adds more train service, can you also add a shuttle bus to the airport from Crystal City?

**VRE Management:**

We wish we could be everything to everyone. As a train agency, shuttle service is not part of our business – we don't have any buses. However, we would certainly be willing to work with any company that wanted to provide this service.

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

VRE constantly reminds customers to be courteous and respectful of the passengers around them. Could you

please ask your employees to also follow these guidelines, particularly on Train 307. Thank you.

**VRE Management:**

Since we have employees who ride the trains and crews, I am not sure which you are referring to. Please email gotrains with the specifics so I can take care of the matter.

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**Jeff from Springfield, VA asks:**

How do you determine what VRE train gets precedence over the other? I ask this because Manassas Line Train 326 was ordered to stop for approximately 20 minutes about 3 miles north of the Backlick Station on Monday (3 April) to allow an (empty) southbound VRE train to pass. This infuriated the passengers who were already late for work. What is the logic in this decision?

**VRE Management:**

The situation you are referring to occurred at the hand off point between CSX and Norfolk Southern. Normally, the loaded train is given precedence, but the circus train was also in the area and interfered with the handoff.

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**Dave from Woodbridge VA asks:**

Is there any way an extra car can be added to train 302? It is always jam packed in the morning. People are usually standing in the aisles by the time we reach the Woodbridge station.

**VRE Management:**

Coincidentally, we had an employee on your train this morning who has brought up the same exact issue. We are looking into possibilities and, if possible, will make a change.

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**John from Manassas asks:**

To get a ticket kiosk at the northern end of the Manassas Park station I understand it has to be within a critical distance of the hub which is too far away at the southern end of the station. Why not move the hub to the center kiosk so that it would be within range of both ends of the station?

**VRE Management:**

Good idea, I will see if we can implement it.

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**Sarge from Fredericksburg, VA asks:**

Is there any chance that CSX will increase their speed limit for passenger trains to 80 mph or higher (up from the current 70)?

**VRE Management:**

I doubt this will occur in the near future because of the difference in speeds between freight and passenger traffic (proposed 80 mph vs freight at 40 mph). Track has to be constructed to meet all of these different conditions.

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**Dirk from Clifton, VA asks:**

What is the status of our new coaches, both the trailers and the cab cars?

**VRE Management:**

Currently, we only have a contract in place for 11 new cab cars. The first of these cars are expected to arrive late 2006 and operate in revenue service in early 2007.

We are hard at work securing all the jurisdictional approvals and an FRA loan needed to exercise the option for 50 more cars. We should complete this by the end of the month. Cross your fingers, we are hopeful that we will have good news for you next month.

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**Ted from Woodbridge, VA asks:**

Can you try to keep your gallery trainsets "pure" with regards to paint schemes? Last summer and fall all of the VRE-painted gallery cars were paired together and the same for the non-repainted ones. In the winter everything got mixed together. Can you purify the trainsets again?

**VRE Management:**

In a perfect world, it would be nice to have trains that all had the same paint scheme. It much easier to take a car out of service for maintenance than to take the whole train set out. As a result, the equipment gets moved around on an as needed basis.

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**Fritz from Fredericksburg, VA** asks:

Is it true that CSX has had money from the Commonwealth to build a third track since 2002 but has not started working on it yet? If so, that's pathetic; if not, I will apologize.

**VRE Management:**

\$66 million was appropriated by the Commonwealth to fund 7 railroad projects. Arkendale was the first project to be completed. The next projects to be completed will be the Quantico Bridge and a third track at L'Enfant in 2007. It can take 2-3 years to complete a railroad project. The long poles are design, environmental analysis, and contractual documents.

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**Suzi from F'burg, VA** asks:

I have been noticing cars being parked in the Fredericksburg Lot for weeks and months on end without moving. I have a trail of emails (and phone calls) I have sent to VRE customer service reporting these cars (spot numbers, tag numbers), yet nothing happens...I finally became frustrated enough to contact the F'burg City Police, who asked if I contacted VRE. My question is this - how many phone calls/emails does it take to get someone to do something about this? And who can I contact directly @ VRE that will treat this seriously?

**VRE Management:**

Your reports on these cars are handled. In some cases, cars that have been reported have moved and cannot be tagged as abandoned. In another case, a car has been identified. Once that it is done, it can be towed and reported to the local authorities. Chalk marks are used to determine longevity.

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**Nick from Stafford** asks:

What is the most current update regarding the investigation into the train derailment? Any date tentatively set for the final report?

**VRE Management:**

Right now, we think the final report will be made public as early as May 2006. We'll let our riders know when the report is issued.

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**Manassas Maniac from Manassas, VA** asks:

I think the quiet car is a bad idea. I often go to the quiet car and talk loudly on my cell phone just to aggravate other passengers. Do you get many requests to do away with the quiet cars?

**VRE Management:**

Quiet cars invoke strong sentiments on both sides. There are no plans to do away with them as they are popular with a large percentage of riders. We do plan to clarify the rules of the quiet car to alleviate some of the questions, and yes, conflicts that arise between people within the quiet car.

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**Ken from Fairfax VA** asks:

What are you doing to improve communications? While it's stated that the typical response time for email is roughly a week, there has been a recent spike in traffic and the response is taking longer. Seriously, this is the same message used at least six months ago. Maybe it's not a spike.

**VRE Management:**

We try to keep the number of staff at Virginia Railway Express as low as possible. One of the consequences of keeping a small staff is that we cannot maintain a staff to handle the spikes. There are many other opportunities

to provide feedback. This forum and our Meet the Management events are also a good way to get your questions answered.

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**JAMES** from **FREDERICKSBURG** asks:

WHAT IS THE STATUS OF THE REPAIRS BEING MADE TO THE KAWASAKI CARS DAMAGED DURING THE DERAILMENT ON JANUARY 5TH?

**VRE Management:**

We'll issue a contract by the end of the week to have the trucks repaired on the three derailed cars. We expect to have the trucks sent back to us within 60-90 days. The cars will then be placed back into service.

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**Jerry** from **Fairfax** asks:

Why were there no train talks issued for the problems April 3rd? Are the right people in the office that early? I'd have driven, had I known, and not seen the afternoon fiasco. Give NS a raspberry for us!

**VRE Management:**

You're point is well taken. In this case, the problems got out ahead of us and we did not notify you as timely as we could have. This was a hard one because, while waiting for orders, they can come any minute. We did not realize the magnitude of it until it caused significant delays. We'll give NS the raspberry but will take one for us as well.

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**Laura** from **Manassas VA** asks:

Is it possible to run more train after 8 in the mornings and one more after 1 PM this would help so many in both directions

**VRE Management:**

You may know that we recently cancelled our 10:15a train on the Manassas Line because of low ridership and lack of parking. Until we increase the parking, we don't anticipate reinstating this train. When we are in a position both financially and capacity-wise to add another train, we will look hard at all requests from both lines to see what we can do.

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**Dan** from **Fredericksburg, VA** asks:

The temporary parking lot at Leeland Road has done a lot to relieve the lack of parking spaces in Leeland's permanent lot for folks taking the later AM trains (thank you). How much longer will this temporary lot be open? Are there any plans to make it permanent, or replace its capacity if/when it closes down?

**VRE Management:**

We expect a report by the end of the month detailing options for the expansion of parking at Leeland and Brooke. We will work closely with Stafford County to increase parking at both stations given the availability of funding.

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**Mike** from **Lorton, VA** asks:

I was late arriving at the Lorton Station and the conductor CLEARLY saw me pull into the lot. The conductor RUDELLY closed the door as I was getting my coffee and briefcase out of my car. I want the conductor punished for his callous treatment of ME and I also want a FORMAL APOLOGY from both VRE and AMTRAK!

**VRE Management:**

We understand your frustration, there is nothing worse than just missing your train. It's happened to me at Burke Centre at least three times. And yes, those conductors still work in VRE service :) But seriously, if a passenger is physically on the platform before the signal to go has been given, the conductor must allow them to board. However, they are not able to wait for people after the signal is given, or a situation like mine where I was still in the parking lot.

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**Kevin** from **Fredericksburg** asks:

Providing the phone numbers for the various cab companies in today's Seat Notice was a good idea. Can you go

one step further and also provide them on the platform display? It would help those of us who may not have kept the Seat Notice (in respect for those getting on after, of course).

**VRE Management:**

Thank you! It is our intention to put them on the posters near the ticket vending machines. That is in the works as we speak. You can also print a copy of the Update from our website and clip the numbers out.

To the person who asked for laminated copies, it's a good idea. We'll look into it for Meet the Managements.

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**Leeland Rider from Stafford Res asks:**

At Leeland Road there is an additional parking lot for "Stafford riders." I understand parking lot is only for Stafford riders but why make a road to the main parking lot and then block it. If the chain were to be removed allowing everyone to drive through the lot, it would significantly reduce the time it takes for the main parking lot to clear. If the school is an issue let me point out that the school is empty after 3pm, only one VRE arrives before then and it usually only carries 20 or so people. So what do you think can we get the chain removed?

**VRE Management:**

The chain is necessary because the new lot is a private lot and cannot be connected to the public lot. Stafford County wanted to reserve the right of who could park there to Stafford residents only. Because one lot is private and the other is federally funded they cannot be contiguous.

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**Greg from Springfield, VA asks:**

1) Why are the windows of the trains always very dirty? One of the highlights of riding VRE is to be able to relax and enjoy the scenery, which is really difficult through dirty windows. 2) Why are so many trees along the tracks (Manassas Line) mangled? Was there a clearing effort? 3) Thanks for reinforcing the need to turn off the vents while the train is traveling through the station. This makes a big improvement in the air quality.

**VRE Management:**

1) Spring cleaning starts this month. All of our trains will be power washed this month and should make the ride more enjoyable. 2) Both railroads have a program that clears the brush on the side of the tracks. This is for clearance purposes and to prevent the possibilities of brush fires. 3) You're welcome. We'll keep emphasizing this with our crews.

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**VRE Management:**

As always, thank you for your questions. I can never answer all of them, but I try to answer a representative sample. We'll see you again next month.

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