

Virginia Railway Express

Let's Talk!

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



There are currently 73 questions waiting to be answered.

VRE Management:

Welcome back! It is now time to begin another online forum. I see many of you have questions regarding the recent delays that we have had, and I will try to answer some of those. I know a lot of you saw the new car on December 6, and there are some comments on that, and hopefully I'll be able to answer those. On with the questions!

Yancey from Fairfax, VA asks:

On Thursday December 7th, I along with another hundred passengers waited for the Manassas 324 to arrive at 6:14. It didn't. After 15 minutes the VRE 'Customer Service Attendant' Robot informed us the 324 was late due to mechanical problems. Why buy new cars when VRE's MOTIVE POWER IS IN POOR CONDITION? I would rather arrive ontime than in style.

VRE Management:

We realize we need both new locomotives and new cars. While new cars are arriving and will enter service soon, my top priority right now is getting the funding we need to order new locomotives. Certainly, if you have opinions regarding locomotive funding, you are welcome to share those with your elected officials.

Jeff from Fredricksburg, Va asks:

I have read that VRE is planning to raise fares next year to offset declining ridership. It seems to be that the last thing you would want to do is increase fares if you want to increase ridership. What VRE needs to do is reduce organizational costs internally and concentrate on providing better on time performance. Then riders will return to VRE.

VRE Management:

We understand that fare increases are not popular and are looking at every option available to us. Our Operations Board meets on Friday. After that meeting, I hope to have news that will be acceptable to everyone.

Linda from Burke, Va asks:

I would like to know why the MARK commuter trains are rarely late even though they travel on CSX tracks just like VRE? Also MARK only raises fares every three to seven years and their fares are much cheaper per mile than VRE, why is this?

VRE Management:

While operating conditions on both VRE and MARC lines differ from day to day, MARC also is affected by freight train traffic and heat restrictions in the summer on their Brunswick and Camden lines (the Penn Line runs on track owned by Amtrak). MARC is also part of a much larger transportation agency, the Maryland Mass Transit Administration, and as a result they have the resources of a much larger agency available to them when it comes to fare policy.

Frosty from North Pole, VA asks:

Brrrrr. Should a heavy snowfall occur after I arrive at work downtown, will VRE run back out in the evening? What exactly is VRE snow policy in the above scenario? I don't want to be stranded downtown or end up with a nightmare bus/walk/jog/hitch hike home.

VRE Management:

VRE has operated through the snow in the past. While each snowstorm is different, situations where snow is severe enough to affect our operation are rare. On some occasions we may be forced to run a more limited schedule, but if we run in the morning, we will run again in the afternoon.

If you haven't already, signing up for our Train Talk e-mail alert service will keep you informed of any situation which may affect your commute as soon as we know.

Dirk from Clifton, VA asks:

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

VRE Management:

The first four cab cars will enter service, two on each line, beginning with service the week of January 8. New cars will continue to enter service every week, replacing Mafersa cab cars on all seven of our Gallery car trains by late February.

The second batch of 50 new cars will begin to enter service in December 2007, replacing the current Gallery cars in earnest.

Lew from Manassas, VA asks:

Will you let us know the exact date and trainsets that the new cars will operate on?

VRE Management:

We will announce the specific information closer to that time, probably the first week of January.

Sharon from Burke, VA asks:

Why don't the new cars have arm rests on the aisle seat?

VRE Management:

We moved the aisle seat armrest from the aisle side to the center of the seat pairs to allow for easier access to and from the seats. We found that this helped speed up boarding and detraining of passengers and cuts down on dwell times in stations. In addition, the center armrest helps define personal space.

Sarge from Woodbridge, VA asks:

What's the word on new locomotives?

VRE Management:

The purchase of new locomotives is the number one priority on our legislative agenda, which has been approved by the board. We are actively seeking federal and state funding to make an initial buy of new locomotives. Hopefully we'll be successful in the next year obtaining funding.

Red from Burke, Virginia asks:

VRE Manassas line trains begin service at 5:05AM. Are any VRE personnel on duty at VRE headquarters at 5:05AM? As late as 6:00AM the information us riders receive is inadequate. What are VRE headquarter operating hours? Why do us riders only receive late notice of the obvious "train 324 is late due to mechanical problems"

from a mechanical voice?

VRE Management:

While our office's normal hours of operation are 7:00a to 7:00p, we do have staff on duty before the first train departs the yard and until the last train of the evening finishes its run. Those staff members monitor train movements and program platform announcements. Unfortunately, releasing information is not an exact science. It sometimes takes a little more time to determine the exact nature of a problem and what the solution (if any) is. We'll keep trying to streamline this process. Of course, we'll also be working on fixing the causes of delays such as the ones which occurred last week too.

Dave from Woodbridge, VA asks:

Are the 2 damaged Kawasaki's back and what train do you plan to put them on? Also, what trains will the new rail cars go to?

VRE Management:

The Kawasakis are back – now on trains 310/313.

Mark from Dale City, VA asks:

I read that MARC has a 3 classes of cleaning, where they are cleaned every day while sitting at mid-storage. Does VRE do this too? I noticed sitting on Train #307 last night, the dust on the windows

VRE Management:

Trash is removed from trains during mid-day storage, while a more thorough cleaning occurs overnight at the outlying yards. Window washing occurs less frequently, and is done as part of a washing of the entire train. However, train 307 with its Kawasaki cars present a different problem. The windows have been damaged by acid and I'm looking for funding to replace them.

Spanky from Manassas Park asks:

Is Tuesday December 12th on Wednesday this year?

VRE Management:

Good point! We moved our forum which normally occurs on a Wednesday to Tuesday due to scheduling conflicts.

Mike from Manassas Park asks:

The parking lot at Manassas Park is overflowing on Wednesday. There have been Wednesdays when I missed the train because I couldn't find a place to park. Other days, the lot never reaches capacity. What is so special about Wednesday?

VRE Management:

Because of flexible work schedules, we have found that many of our passengers choose to take either Friday or Monday off. As a result, there seems to be a more concentrated workforce taking our trains on Wednesdays.

Billy from Stafford, VA asks:

When are the new LCD display coming? Also why don't you have a screen somewhere showing exactly where the train is located at each station. Like you have on the website. It would be really cool to press a button on the TVM and be able to see where the train is located.

VRE Management:

The new variable message signs at the stations should be in place by November 2007. Alexandria and Manassas Park will be the first stations to receive the new signs, so we can work out any bugs there may be. We are looking into the possibility of putting Rail Time on those signs, however we are not able to put them on the TVMs.

Earl from Stafford, Virginia asks:

Why is there no provision of emergency lighting in the Gallery cars? Lighting went out yesterday evening on 303,

and the lack of emergency lighting makes for a dangerous situation.

VRE Management:

All cars have emergency lighting. My guess is that the batteries in your car were weak or dead. I'll have the train inspected immediately.

DP from Burke, VA asks:

Although the Burke EZ busses are not under your control, could you pass on a request? None of the busses have reliable signs. Most appear to be broken, most of the time. That makes finding the right bus in the darkness of night a bit difficult. Solving the problem is easy and cheap -- just have the drivers use a magic marker and posterboard to make the appropriate sign, and post it in their windshield when they are waiting for an evening train. Please make it easy for the riders to find the right bus!

VRE Management:

We'll let the EZ Bus know about your suggestion. I'm sure we can make some changes.

Connie from Dumfries, VA asks:

I've been riding VRE since July '06. I've noticed VRE riders with VRE Blue Badge clip holders that retract to hold tickets but I have no idea where to get one. Can you let the VRE "Rookies" know where they can obtain one?

Thank you, Connie (VRE Quantico Station)

VRE Management:

You can request one by emailing us at gotrains@vre.org with your mailing address. We also give them out when we visit stations as part of our Meet the Management program.

Susan from Stafford, VA asks:

Why is the new car so small and uncomfortable. Yes, I did go visit at Union Station and disappointed with what I saw. Americans are large-bodied folks and I cannot envision an average VRE rider sitting in those chairs for over 1/2 hour. Nothing to me is more important than the seat. Not even the cup holders!

VRE Management:

The seats were designed to accommodate a minimum of a 95th percentile male, and are among the widest seats in our fleet.

David from Woodbridge VA asks:

Are there plans to add another platform to the other side of the tracks in Woodbridge? If so, when would this take place?

VRE Management:

Yes, the design has been completed. We will bid out construction next year. The plan is to have a second platform with a pedestrian bridge connected to the present parking structure.

Tyler from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

In a recent article VRE are suggesting that they are going to raise fares and eliminate FRC's. Why do VRE want eliminate the FRC's program?

VRE Management:

It is currently recommended by the budget committee to eliminate the FRC program. We hear from both sides, both those who think we should keep it and those who feel that it is a waste of VRE's money. Once a final decision has been made by the board, we will let you know.

RJ from VA asks:

Why did you stop hand validating the red, white, & blue FRCs? What about the folks who don't ride very often so haven't heard the announcements? Or the folks coming back from deployment, or have been out on FMLA,

Maternity, or disability leave and didn't get the e-mail? The printed expiration was 7/1/2007, not "7/1/2007 unless we decide otherwise." Is this another way for VRE to make some extra cash with the fines?

VRE Management:

The old FRCs were improperly encoded with the wrong expiration date and cannot be validated in our TVMs. Because of this, we opted to exchange out the old with ones that can be validated. We have been working on these exchanges for the last 3 months and are happy to exchange any remaining ones you may have. Visit our website for details.

Sandy from Fredericksburg asks:

Wondered why Manassas Line schedules are on Fredericksburg Line trains? They are on train no's. 304 and 309.

VRE Management:

Sometimes we move equipment from one train to another, and in this case some of the cars used on trains 304 and 309 were replaced with other cars coming from Manassas line trains. As a result, equipment which was on the Manassas line (and thus has Manassas line timetables in it) ended up on a Fredericksburg line run. The correct timetables will be placed in the car the next time our crews restock the train.

Steven from Stafford asks:

Which legislative body in Virginia can we, as commuters, attempt to influence to provide better public transportation through increased taxes and improved resourcing?

VRE Management:

I would recommend that you discuss your views with your local state delegate and state senator, especially relative to your views on VRE. The more their constituents talk to them, the more I feel they take an interest in VRE.

Chelesa from Stafford, VA asks:

When would the new fare increase go into affect if the board approve it?

VRE Management:

If a new fare increase is approved by the board, it would go into effect on 1 July 2007.

NH from Fredericksburg asks:

What is going on with the parking situation at Fredericksburg? Is it going to get better or worse?

VRE Management:

It will probably get worse when one or two of our leased lots will not renew their contracts with us. I estimate we will lose 100 parking spaces within the next year.

Mike from Fredericksburg asks:

Don't tell people to look to elected officials to share opinions about locomotive funding, as you did in response to Yancey's question. The issue is your choice to purchase new railcars instead of locomotives, which was an extremely poor decision. You need to explain yourself rather than pointing the finger at elected officials. How about some accountability.

VRE Management:

It can take several years to procure new equipment. When we began the new railcar purchase, seats were at a premium and the equipment was necessary. Now, locomotives are what we need. As I indicated, it is now my top funding priority.

Brucie1 from Woodbridge, Va asks:

I have a deaf daughter who has caught the train at Union Station only to miss her Rippon Station stop on several occasions due to a lack of communications equipment provided by VRE. This is in violation of federal law. What

are you going to do about this? Thank you.

VRE Management:

I am sorry to hear that your daughter missed her stop. Our new railcars will have interior signs to help those who are deaf and hard of hearing. Unfortunately, at this time we are not going to retrofit our equipment as most of them will be replaced by the new equipment.

Jenny from Fairfax asks:

How much longer are you going to continue to let Spotsy riders freeload of the system? VRE's deficits can largely be attributed to the fact that some 10% of riders come from a jurisdiction that does not contribute funding.

VRE Management:

Spotsylvania represents about 15% of our riders. I cannot force Spotsylvania to join nor can I restrict their residents from getting on VRE. I agree with you, I hope they choose to join the VRE family in the future.

Mike from Stafford, Va. asks:

Why is it that the digital displays on the platform at Brooke never work?

VRE Management:

Our current PA and sign system at the stations is nearly 15 years old. The manufacturer no longer supports them and maintenance has become increasingly difficult. That being said, we do have staff visiting several stations today, including Brooke, to return them to service.

Russ from Fredericksburg asks:

It might give OTP a little boost to make maximum use of car types with wide doors, which allow a greater number of people to board or detrain at the same time.

VRE Management:

I agree--our new railcars have the extra wide boarding that our current Gallery cars have that will allow for greater flood loading and unloading.

Geoff from Warrenton, VA asks:

How about turning off the auto-refresh on this page after you're done answering questions. It would make it easier to read and there's no point in refreshing after the session is finished.

VRE Management:

We have requested this from our web providers, and it is not an easy fix. However, after this session is finished, you can visit the forum archives which has PDF versions which do not refresh.

Just curious from Manassas asks:

Have you changed the train consist on the 5:11 out of Crystal City? There seems to be 7 cars instead of the advertised 8 cars. I would also like to know when you plan on updating your website to reflect the ridership. At last review your numbers reflected April/May ridership. I've tried to make decisions about which trains to take based on the ridership and your website has not been helpful in that decision. Please advise. Thanks!

VRE Management:

We have recently looked at our fleet management plan to see where we could make changes. As a result, the 8-car set on the Manassas line was decreased to 7 cars so we could re-allocate the equipment. We'll keep an eye on it and if the ridership should show that the train is becoming more crowded, will re-think this position.

Woody from Manassas, VA asks:

Has anyone on your staff that's at least 5'10" tall tried to ride one of the Bombadier cars? What about when it's REALLY crowded? Those things are horrible and have very limited leg room. Will you be replacing them with the new cars next year?

VRE Management:

I don't like the seating arrangement in the Bombardier cars either. The good news is they will be gone by February 2008, back to Seattle, where hopefully the people are shorter.

Michael from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

Regarding the 'holiday' after Thanksgiving who made that decision? Many people still had to go to work, why wasn't a S schedule employed? Do you plan on hosing riders in similar fashions in the future?

VRE Management:

Before we eliminated service on the day after Thanksgiving, we ran a limited "S" schedule. However, we still found that there were less than 2,000 trips that day, when we normally have roughly 15,000. From a cost perspective, I could not justify offering service that day.

Rick from Burke asks:

With the difficulties of train 324 last Thursday, I was shocked the PA system at Burke made no announcements. I suggest some operational tests regularly until construction is complete -- you don't know cables are cut until it doesn't work. Again, communications help.

VRE Management:

I am frustrated with the Burke situation. The construction and the power fluctuations damaged our PA and sign system there. Unfortunately, it has taken longer to fix than I would have preferred. I anticipate that everything will be operational again by the end of the week. Unfortunately, with the rough week we had last week, we were not able to adequately inform you. For that I apologize.

Laura from Manassas, VA asks:

Why has the train makeup of #326 been changed from Gallery cars to Bombardier cars? The Bombardier cars are smaller and the train appears to be shorter than when the Gallery cars are in use. This means the cars have been very full the past few mornings. Thank you

VRE Management:

As part of the fleet reallocation that I mentioned earlier, another change was to train 326. While it may seem to be more full, this trainset actually has 32 more seats.

Mark from Manassas, VA asks:

This may not be VRE's to answer, but can you tell us why so-called security inspections of the Manassas line only take place when the trains stops at Alexandria. We cover a lot of territory between Broad Run and Old Town and if you are serious about preventing another Madrid, would think it is more prudent to make random (and more frequent) inspections at different stations instead of just one. Thanks!

VRE Management:

According to the intelligence we have received, the greatest risk is closer to the city where there would be more damage and the action would be more visible. Because of this, we have concentrated our public inspections to those stations closer to the city. However, we also perform random inspections in our yards and some outlying stations.

Ira from MARC asks:

Please assure your customers that every problem that VRE has on CSX is experienced by MARC. It is only a matter of degree. Even on MARC the Camden Line has a much better OTP than the Brunswick Line even though the two lines are dispatched by the same dispatcher. The complaints of your passengers are the same as ours. In the past year we have been fortunate to do better than VRE in on time performance but the wheel of fate can turn at any time. The Fredericksburg line is if anything more complicated than either of our two CSX lines because of the large number of Amtrak trains.

VRE Management:

Thanks for that perspective Ira. For those of you folks who do not know him, Ira is a member of the management

team for MARC rail.

Lew from Stafford, VA asks:

Just received an email here at the Department of Energy which said in part, "Beginning in 2008, WMATA will no longer issue paper fare cards for the SEET, except for commuting modes that have not yet implemented the SmarTrip® technology." I buy my train tickets at a store near L'Enfant Plaza. Will they be equipped to read the Smartcards and deduct the amounts for our tickets? If so, when?

VRE Management:

The whole region is involved in a transition over to the SmarTrip cards. VRE is part of this project and we are hoping to be able to accept them by 2008.

Gina from Burke, VA asks:

I would love to use the satellite lot at the church more but the current schedule is far too early. They set it to leave the lot at 7:15 for the 7:43 train. It never takes more than 5 minutes (if even that) to get there, leaving us waiting it the COLD for bone chilling 23 minutes instead just 10. I heard they might change the schedule so that it would depart later. Any news?

VRE Management:

Good point. Once we've had a little bit more experience under our belts with this, we will talk to Fairfax Connector to see if any adjustments can be made.

PF from Burke, VA asks:

First, thanks to VRE for the rides to and from work the past 10 years. Second, I've noticed that everyone I'm riding with looks about ten years older. Is VRE taking any steps to make their trains more accessible and comfortable for the mature rider?

VRE Management:

First, you're welcome. Second, every effort has been made to have our trains accessible to everyone. Certainly, as our riders get older, they will still be able to enjoy their ride on VRE.

R Lewis from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

How many passengers do the new cars hold vs. the old (current) cars?

VRE Management:

The cab cars will hold 123 seats. The trailers which have restrooms will have 132 seats and the trailers without toilets will have 144 seats.

Gaspforair from Falmouth, Va. asks:

(Cough, Cough) -- I am lucky to still be alive to after riding in cars 607 and 608 on Train 307. The fumes from the engine are sucked into the cars so strongly that people cannot breath. It is a serious health hazard. I have sent in a maintenance notice and have talked with the conductors to no avail. Can we at least get oxygen masks like on airplanes so we can breath? Why not put the engine at the rear so the fumes are not sucked into the cars? If we can't get this fixed, I am going to contact the EPA and have its inspectors take air readings. (Cough, cough, gasp)

VRE Management:

I know that this train had some issues several months ago. We have taken every measure we can to look at the exhaust system and have corrected all the problems that existed. Unfortunately, due to the nature of the locomotive, some odor will remain.

Jim from Manassas, VA asks:

Dale: Thanks for the VRE e-mail that clarified the Washington Post article on low ridership. Too bad the Post did not publish current ridership which is obviously +++ today, plus on-time performance is excellent!

VRE Management:

Thanks for the observation. While we have had a few delays in the last week, I am sure we will return to the high on-time performance we had been experiencing in November.

Clyde from Fredericksburg asks:

Ridership is down so to make up for lost revenue you propose another rate hike. How about improving services to bring ridership and revenues up? Or is the intent to chase more passengers out of the system?

VRE Management:

I am well aware that riders do not want another fare increase. I do not want to have one either. Our focus now at VRE is to continue to increase ridership back to the levels we experienced about a year ago. My recommendation to the board this Friday will not include a fare increase. Early next week, we will let you know what the outcome was.

TP from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

Is there going to be an early train?

VRE Management:

Still working the issue. I haven't given up, but I don't have any news.

EM from Broad Run, VA asks:

Geez, I never realized how many jerks ride the train with me everyday! I've ridden VRE for more than 7 years and cannot conceive of anything you could do that would make me go back to driving into DC. For those of you whining about VRE services, lack of service, FRCs, parking, signage, seats, etc., please do me a favor, get back into your car and drive to work. For VRE and its employees, thanks for providing a service I profoundly appreciate and that which has saved me from an early grave on I66. Merry Christmas!

VRE Management:

While I don't think our riders are jerks, this is certainly another perspective on our service. And for all of you, Merry Christmas and a prosperous New Year!

VRE Management:

Once again, the hour has flown by! There was a number of questions and comments about locomotives, and I am aware of the situation and the failures that we are having with locomotives. Now that we have purchased new railcars, I will double my effort to secure funding for locomotives. Hopefully next year I'll have good news on those efforts.

It's been a rough year, but things are getting better. I hope in the January legislative session, Santa will bring us a late present in the way of new funding. Keep your fingers crossed and hopefully we'll have new locomotives soon.

VRE Management:

I want to wish you and your families a great Holiday Season, and we'll see you next year on January 3.

And for those of you who pointed out my typo that the next Wednesday, December 12 is in 2007, I assure you we'll be meeting before then.

--Dale
