

Virginia Railway Express

Let's Talk!

The next VRE online forum will start on Wednesday, February 1st at 12 noon.



There are currently 96 questions waiting to be answered.

VRE Management:

Happy almost Groundhog Day and Happy Year of the Dog! I can't believe that it's been a month already. 2006 certainly started differently than we had expected.

Now that we have put that behind us, we are ready to take on the upcoming year.

First things first, it's time to take your questions.

David from Warrenton, VA asks:

Hi there: I know its been unseasonably warm lately, but in the colder months, it might be nice to have overhead space heaters at select VRE station stops. Just a suggestion. Thanks, David

VRE Management:

It has been unseasonably warm this winter – not that our facilities people are complaining. A year without snow is music to their ears! We agree that heaters would be a nice amenity, but unfortunately they are not in our budget.)-:

Felicis from Stafford, Virginia asks:

I ride the 309 or the 311 train in the afternoons, Latly the rides has been so rough it feel although the cars will come lose or maybe be derailed from its tracks.

VRE Management:

After the derailment earlier this month, we know that some riders are concerned about their trains. Your safety is our top priority and we are taking every precaution and following every safety standard to ensure that you remain safe. If there is a particular area that you experience this in, please email gotrains and we will be happy to look into it further.

Jack from Gainesville, VA asks:

Now that the Broad Run parking lot is expanded, will VRE encourage the Prince William County Police to crack down on those who park in unmarked spaces? The parking on the wrong side of the crosswalk makes the lot too dangerous when exiting. Most of these illegal parkers take early trains so it's not a case of no spaces being available.

VRE Management:

We will talk to the PW police about this. However, the issue for the police is the rules are hard to enforce because of the poor striping in the lot. The main lot at Broad Run is in definite need of some cosmetic surgery.

Unfortunately, it is not in VDOT's plan to fix it this year. We will talk to the district commander and see what we can do.

Donna from Dumfries asks:

Train 304 - when, if ever, can we expect to get our Kawasaki cars back? They were much more comfortable and

didn't seem anywhere near as crowded as the Gallery cars are.

VRE Management:

Believe it or not, the Gallery car set has almost as many seats as the Kawasaki cars. The Gallery set has 850 and the Kawasaki set had 855. At this time, we do not have a set time for when those cars will be back in service. Some of the cars are still undergoing some repairs.

Emily from Burke, VA asks:

I am a young professional and I take the train on a regular basis. Is there a way to designate a car the "young car" for people who are looking to talk to people their age, i.e. under 30. Thanks.

VRE Management:

It would be a really interesting experiment to have a car designated as "singles." The idea has been suggested internally and I thought she was crazy. While we can't do it now, it may be something that we try to pilot in the future.

Sandra from Nokesville VA asks:

Why don't the conductors make more announcements concerning the "Quiet Car"? Lately there have been more and more people using cell phones on both the morning and evening trains. I would like to believe they are new riders and not aware of the guidelines. Periodic review (at least weekly) by the conductors would be appreciated.

VRE Management:

Quiet cars are a challenge for conductors. They do make announcements, however, some people selectively tune out the rules they don't wish to hear. We can add some courtesy announcements on Quiet cars to see if that helps with the problem.

David from Stafford asks:

Just a curious question, but what is the latest status of the 11 new cars VRE is supposedly getting? I take 308/311 to work, and the fifth car you added some months ago helps, but we can use a sixth at times.

VRE Management:

We will begin receiving the first shipment late this year. However, these cars will not solve any crowding problems. They will only be replacing the current single level cab cars in our fleet, which have already been sold to Connecticut.

Doug from Fairfax, VA asks:

What is your best guess of the year in which Haymarket service will begin?

VRE Management:

That's an excellent question. It will be more than four years and highly contingent upon funding. Currently, about \$2.5 million. That is a drop in the bucket compared with what we think we will need. You may want to visit the report on our website for more details. You can find a link on the homepage under "What's New."

Stephanie from Locust Grove, VA asks:

Why does the conductor on Train 303 allow passengers to stand up right at the Brooke station if they are not getting off until Leeland Rd?! I feel the conductor knows the regular people that are queuing up and it makes me so annoyed that they have to be the first people off the train and out of the parking lot. They are also saving seats for their friends that are picked up at Alex. Station. They act like children running a race. Since the conductor knows which car I'm referring to, they need to stand in the vestibule and not let them crowd up the aisle way.

Annoyed Passenger, Stephani

VRE Management:

Like all of our courtesy issues, queuing is one of those annoying habits that some of our passengers can't seem to get over. Please email gotrains and let us know which end of the train you are seeing this on. We'll look into this further and see if there are any additional measures we can take to make this situation better.

Ann from Broadrun asks:

I forgot to ask could you publish a list of the conductors and the train they are normally assigned to.

VRE Management:

Interesting request! The crews change trains fairly frequently, so this list wouldn't be terribly helpful. However, if you call our office, we will be happy to help you locate your favorite conductor.

King from Stafford, Virginia asks:

At the Leeland Station, there seem to be smokers at the entrance to the stairs, and on the ramp, sometimes close to the ticket machines. I understand a smoker's right to smoke, but some of them are being disrespectful or just plain oblivious of their proximity to others (particularly non-smokers). Any chance that these areas can be occasionally policed by VRE staff? Thank you.

VRE Management:

OK Smokers – give the non-smokers a break. Please use the 100 most north feet of the station only for smoking.

Pat from Broadrun asks:

Yeah for the newest parking space. Maybe I can get to park up front, too. Truly, thank everyone for the hard work putting our safety as a priority. I'll bet we still end up with not enough

VRE Management:

Unfortunately, that is true. With all the development west of Broad Run, this lot is sure to continue its popularity! (I will pass your thanks to the staff who made the lot happen!)

Jeff from Bristow, VA asks:

I have some questions regarding Broad Run. 1. Can VDOT adjust the light pattern at Piper Ln.? It would make sense to allow more cars onto 28S from Piper Ln. 2. Why wasn't an exit put on the small triangular parking lot to the Air Port Perimeter Rd.? There is a bottle neck at the exit from the parking lot. 3. It looks like there will be another barn parking lot bottle neck on the Piper Ln. exit unless another exit to Piper Ln. is put in for that lot. 4. Can VDOT put a stop sign at Piper Ln. and the exit to the parking lot? Cars zoom around the corner and I have seen accidents

VRE Management:

Wow – lots of Broad Run people today!

To answer succinctly – 1) VDOT has looked at the light (with prodding from Dr. Gridlock, no less!) and made changes. They aren't inclined to do more right now. 2) As part of the design review more exits were examined, and while they would get you out of the physical lot faster, it would create difficulty on the exit roads 3) No other exit from Piper is planned 4) We can ask about a stop sign.

Richard from Bristow, VA asks:

I'd like to know why the trains don't pull up to the station 10 - 15 minutes before departure instead of 3-5 minutes. I take either the 322 or 324 out of Broad Run and it can get quite cold waiting until just before departure for the train to pull up.

VRE Management:

The train crews perform checks prior to leaving the yard. Generally they will pull up as soon as they have finished all their "pre flight" work. I randomly checked the pull up times for these trains for five days the week of January 23rd and this week. It looks like they are coming into the station 5-8 minutes early about 50% of the time. I will mention it to the Manassas Line service manager to see if there is anything he can help with.

Allen from Rippon, VA asks:

Who do we contact when the ticket machines are not fully working at a stations? For the past several months I have had problems purchasing a monthly ticket at Rippon because 2 to 3 of the three machines would not read or authorize a credit or debit card.

VRE Management:

On our website, on the feedback page is a comment form to post problems with our TVMs. The form goes to Customer Service and the manager of the fare collection system.

Michael from **Gainesville, VA** asks:

can you comment on the increased number of equipment breakdowns and delays on 333 since nov.

VRE Management:

I know that this train has had a wide variety of problems, including signal and switch problems and other train traffic. While the on-time performance for this train since August has not been great, January was at its lowest at 65% on-time. Nearly half of those delays were due mechanical problems. We will continue to work hard to improve 333's on-time performance and continue to monitor our progress. Hopefully, by the next forum, you will have noticed an improvement.

Rick Spearman from **Fredericksburg, VA** asks:

I know this is a small thing, but would sure be great to be able to do more things with bicycles on VRE. I think it's a great system and I think you're doing something on this with some of the new cars, but can you do more?

VRE Management:

The new cab cars that we have ordered are bike friendly. After they are all on-line, we will re-evaluate our bicycle policy.

Steven from **Manassas Park, VA** asks:

I took the 332 train from Manassas Park everyday on the first car. One thing that make me worried is the Train driver was smoking in the cabin and every time he was smoking the smoke alarm went off, the noise of smoke alarm bother and make people nervous alot, how VRE handle that?

VRE Management:

Uh-oh. Smoking is not permitted on our trains by anyone. Please email us at gotrains and let us know which date you noticed this on so we can take of this immediately. However, one note, there is not a smoke alarm on the trains. The alarm you heard was probably part of a driver alert system and is not unusual. You can expect to hear fairly frequently during the trip.

John from **Woodbridge VA** asks:

is there any way that VRE could possibly put a larger "Status" sign outside the entrance to the Parking Garage (kinda like the I-95 Status signs)? Ive noticed that a lot of people fly in to park (in order to make it to the train), only to find out their train is currently 20 minutes late. I think this would also help a lot of folks that need to find alternate transportation, prior to parking, getting out of their vehicles, and walking to the platform for the updates.

VRE Management:

I like the idea. We are working on an Request for Proposals for new signs at our stations. We may be able to look into this as part of the design.

Chopped Liver from **manassas, va** asks:

Iv'e noticed passengers walking on the tracks to get around (and board) a stopped VRE train at Manassas. Isn't that dangerous and illegal?

VRE Management:

No one on our trains is chopped liver!

But seriously, you're right, it is dangerous and illegal. Very shortly, people walking around trains can expect to wait for the next train. If caught, they will not be permitted to board that specific train. One of the worst things that could happen would be for VRE to hit one of its own passengers.

Judith from Clifton, VA asks:

I would just like to compliment the conductors who usually make the announcements on the last evening trains for each line – the announcements are informative, unobtrusive, and audible.

VRE Management:

Thanks. We will pass your appreciation along!

Ken from Crystal City VA asks:

Is there a way to get more up to date -- better yet -- live announcements on the platform PA Systems? When we really need them, such as to tell us to load at the end of the platform to get around a train, there is no information. Handheld PAs would probably seem too expensive to put on each train, but when we need information, the current system just doesn't get it done. Of course, we've had a few problems lately with the train PA systems, too.

VRE Management:

Live announcements are not feasible in most situations because we need to talk to multiple stations at one time. We are working on improving our platform announcements. As for our PAs on board, if you notice a problem, please notify us using the train information form on the feedback page of our website.

Bill from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

Any word on the reason for the derailment last month. I was on the that train and wondered if it was the switch.....Thanks

VRE Management:

A full report and a public hearing will be provided by the NTSB upon completion of their investigation. How long that will take, we are not sure. We will be sure to let you know as soon as we know.

Ken from Woodbridge, VA asks:

There are wind barriers at Woodbridge and Rippon. Can we get some at L'Enfant? With the new buildings, it has become a VERY cold wind tunnel up there...

VRE Management:

We heard that, too. We'll ask our facilities group to take a look at the options.

Montague from Manassas, VA asks:

If 323 and 334's slots are still available, could you experiment with a MARC run-through train to Manassas?

VRE Management:

Cost is the issue for more service right now. And, MARC run through service, although long term goal, isn't workable in the short run. Some of the planned track improvements at L'Enfant will bring that possibility closer, but you probably won't see this happen in the next few years.

Heather from Clifton, VA asks:

I'm a frequent rider in the quiet cars, which after this morning's ride I appreciate even more (some people just can't keep their voices down), but please remind folks that it is a quiet car, not a 'vow of silence' car! Some people get quite nasty about the least noise. I've even seen a conductor loudly chastise someone whose cell phone rang -- it only rang once and they didn't even pick up! That's too much. Thanks

VRE Management:

As I said before, quiet cars are a challenge. It's important that everyone knows that it is a "quiet" car not a "silent" car. Very shortly, we expect to post quiet car rules and regs in each quiet car. Hopefully, this will help.

Molly from Woodbridge, VA asks:

Why do you use the big hulking six gallery car trainsets for the mid-day trains? Why not save some fuel and use 313's consist for the Fredericksburg line and 335's for the Manassas line? That would also ensure they'd always make it back for their evening trains.

VRE Management:

The midday train sets are sent out because they turn and become another later evening train. For example, #301 becomes #309 and #325 becomes #329. They are sized for their largest run. While changing the trains could save some fuel, the operational cost to move them around would not make sense.

Dan from Burke asks:

Last month you mentioned that you'd make on-time performance a priority. What has been your track record for the month of January?

VRE Management:

On-time performance is posted on the website under performance measures. We will post January's numbers shortly.

David from Manassas asks:

FYI: The bench at Rolling Road station is dangerously rusted at the support post. It will break any day.

VRE Management:

Thanks for telling us. We'll notify our facilities people to take a look at it as soon as possible.

rick from Burke, VA asks:

is Emily from Burke looking for a husband???

VRE Management:

I don't know. Are you auditioning?

Bruce from Woodbridge asks:

Last week a Fredericksburg line commuter had a heart attack. What kind of training does the crew have and equipment???

VRE Management:

Our crews take multiple classes in emergency preparedness, including a class called PREPARE, which is first aid and emergency response. Additionally, each crew is certified in CPR and the use of the Automatic External Defibrillators on each of our trains.

Doug from Burke, VA asks:

Why can't you be like MARC and Amtrak and sell tickets on board trains? Do hundred-dollar fines from forgetful passengers bring much-needed revenue to VRE?

VRE Management:

VRE does not see or keep any of the fines that passengers pay for not having a ticket on board. All the money goes to the Commonwealth!

When VRE was started it was an intentional move not to take cash. We don't sell tickets on board because it actually costs more money to do so and then there is the issue of handling cash on board. Having said that we sympathize with those who do receive a summons for truly forgetting to validate their ticket, it has become necessary for us to draw a hard line with those who board without a valid ticket. (It's the same argument for people who don't see the speed limit sign and get caught by the police!)

Marty from Annandale, VA asks:

The 324 is getting PACKED. A coworker of mine takes the 326 and tells me it has plenty of room. Can VRE add more cars to 324?

VRE Management:

Train #324 averaged at 79% full for the month of January. Some days were more, some days were less. Train #326 has the same number of seats and is 84% full for the same month. Unfortunately, since this is a six car set, we don't have any plans to add more cars at this time.

Mike from Lorton, VA asks:

After further research I have been unable to find any information pertaining to "Oak Leaf Oil". My research even extended to the National Association Of State Foresters. Could you please elaborate on your findings with the "Oak Leaf Oil"? This is pertaining to the Manassas incident a few months ago.

VRE Management:

Not sure what you are looking for. The oil problem is specifically a problem for trains on heavy steel rail. The leaves are crushed by the wheels and create a lubricant between the rail and the wheel. For those that missed this see our (Although during rain spells in the fall if you will hear traffic reporters mention the slippery conditions because of the leaves).

Porkchop from Manassas asks:

How much fuel does a typical train use for a round trip from Broad Run to DC and back?

VRE Management:

At 35.8 miles between Broad Run and Union Station, we use about 179 gallons one way (0.2 miles/gallon). As one recent forum reader remarked in an email to us:

"On the surface that may sound bad (compared to cars, etc.), but you should have followed it up with the fact that each train carries (whatever the average number) passengers, and therefore the passenger miles per gallon would be very good (especially compared to even hybrid or HOV cars or busses). Assuming the average ridership per train is 500 passengers ... in that case the passenger miles per gallon (PMG) would be 100 PMG, which is a lot better."

Thanks to both of you for your feedback.

Bruce from Manassas, VA asks:

Will VRE allow me to carry a 60 inch projection television on board if I can fit it in the aisle?

VRE Management:

A Super Bowl TV, perhaps? Unfortunately, the answer is no, you cannot block the aisle.

Jim from Manassas, VA asks:

If I purchase two tickets can I have the whole row seat to myself?

VRE Management:

Each ticket allows a person one ride. You could make the argument that two tickets gets two seats, however, I don't think it would fly if someone was left standing as a result.

Pete from Woodbridge asks:

I guess I could join in and be one of those that finds only your performance, or the quality of service an issue. Instead, with you showing signs of winning some of the past battles, I remain confident. Understanding neighbors ride together.

VRE Management:

We know it's tough to be a loyal customer right now. Thank you.

Geoff from Centreville, VA asks:

I would just like to compliment the crew of 332 on Monday for their handling of the medical situation on board at Alexandria -- they were very professional and efficient in the critical minutes. Also, a nod to CSX dispatching for not making a late train later, even though it was plain that there was plenty of other traffic about.

VRE Management:

We will pass that along. We have had a rash of medical emergencies lately (no pun intended). The intense training and the AEDs have definitely come in handy.

Lee from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

This is not so much a question, but actually a statement. I've noticed on several occasions recently that trains are moving away from stations before the doors are closed, especially if trains are running late. I see this as a serious safety concern. Perhaps someone was delayed in getting to the door when the train reaches their stop. If this person were mid step in detraining when the train starts to move they could be knocked off balance, causing them to fall. What if they fall under the train as it moves to leave the station? This could result in serious injury or even death.

VRE Management:

The doors are supposed to be closed prior to leaving the station. Having said that some people will force them open as the train is pulling out. If this is a consistent problem, drop us a line and let us know which train you see this on.

Hammer from Fredericksburg asks:

Now that the Leeland St. has an overflow lot, there is no reason for continued double parking, parking outside designated areas, parking in the vender area, parking in the striped areas, parking on the grass etc. Please forward to the county supervisor, since there is lots of \$\$\$ to be made for the county's coffers if they ticket these offenders.

VRE Management:

Stafford County is responsible for patrolling the Leeland parking lot. We have hear from some of our passengers that are not Stafford County residents that parking for the later train in the VRE lot is still hard to find. Because the Stafford County lot did not use any federal or state funding, the County can limit it to its residents only.

In the meanwhile, we will continue to advocate our position of ticketing only egregious violations and balancing the need for safety with the need for parking.

Chuck from Bumpass asks:

Two related questions: What is the status of provided wireless Internet access aboard VRE trains? Have you decided not to follow through on this? It would appear that the new Gallery cars do not have tables for working. Many of us riders on the longer rides from Fredericksburg use travel time for getting work done with laptops. This is particularly important as VRE delays become more frequent and longer in duration. Thanks

VRE Management:

The reason that this program has been tabled is that we cannot find a provider that is capable of maintaining full service throughout our service area. There is at least one significant dead spot on each line. Rather than offering partial service, we will continue to look for a complete solution.

Tonya from Mount Vernon asks:

I ride the VRE from a lot closer in than most, but I still think it's one of the best modes of transportation into and out of the District. The only concern that I have relates to the continual "saving of seats" for friends or colleagues at least two stops away, and the "expansion" by riders across two or more seats with their personal belongings. In addition to the routine "rider etiquette" reminders, isn't there a more strict stance that VRE can take to solve this problem? We ALL pay to ride the VRE - we all deserve a seat.

VRE Management:

The policy is one ticket one seat/ride and saving seats is not permissible. If this becomes an issue, please let the conductor know. We will add this reminder to our courtesy queue.

Paris from Spotsylvania, VA asks:

Could we get a schedule in a format that will fit a 320x320 screen, for those of us who have palm pilots/palm phones? That would be extremely convenient.

VRE Management:

That service is currently available. We will post a link today under "What's New" on our website so it is easier to find.

Lisa from Dumfries, Virginia asks:

Can VRE send text messages to riders cellular phone?

VRE Management:

Absolutely! Our Train Talk system can send short text messages to cell phones. The message itself is limited to 100 characters. When you sign up (or login to your current account), add the email address of your phone and choose mobile for the type of email. This will make sure that you have the short text version of the message.

Bob from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

What's the latest news on the proposed Spotsylvania County station?

VRE Management:

Spotsylvania Board of Supervisors has not voted yet to join the VRE family. Hopefully, the vote will occur soon. We'll let you know when that is schedule to occur.

Bart from Manassas asks:

This time of year is dark going to/from work and it is hard to see the stops coming up-aside from a ballpark figure looking at my watch. The announcements for the stops are very rare (especially in the morning-#326).

VRE Management:

We are aware that some trains need to improve their announcements and are working with Amtrak to make sure that this gets done quickly.

Pat from Broadrun asks:

Emily from Burke is right. These are the talkers. Besides watching romance start may lead to a wedding on the train. What a Party! going home. We have had Birthday Breakfasts and the rest got Donut Holes so we were not excluded. That was fun. Go for it.

VRE Management:

We know of several couples who have met on the train, dated, and got married as a result of VRE. We also know of a number of close knit groups of friends that have formed as a result of their commute. Riding the train truly is a community.

Evan from Burke, VA asks:

I know it's a small thing, but is there a plan to have a common outer paint schematic on all the trains. The Manassas line consists of rides that look like they've been put together from leftovers. Thank you

VRE Management:

You're right. We have cobbled together a number of older cars and centered our limited money on ensuring the critical operational components of the cars are in working order. It costs \$25,000 to paint one rail car, which we determined not to be necessary. We are working hard to procure 50 new stainless steel rail cars. Overtime we would be able to phase out the older cars.

Dale from Woodbridge, VA asks:

I was riding one of MARC's Kawasaki cars loaned to VRE and its windows are cleaner and easier to see outside, than VRE's own Kawasaki's. Can you make your own Kawasaki's that clean?

VRE Management:

When we leased the trains from MARC one of the conditions was that we bring it up to the VRE standard of cleaning. While you may not have rode in this car when it was first brought to us, staff riding that train commented that they were quite below the VRE standard.

Our Kawasaki windows have a different problem that makes seeing out them more difficult. One of the vendors that cleaned the windows used an improper chemical, which clouded them up. The only way to really see out these windows would be to replace them. We just don't have the money for that now.

Lisa from Dumfries, VA asks:

When will Rippon get vending machines and restrooms?

VRE Management:

Currently, we have no plans for either. We are attempting to purchase more rail cars with restrooms.

Karen from Manassas asks:

The TVMs are not accepting debit cards. I have never been able to use my debit card at the TVMs, but credit cards work just fine. At Manassas, where there is only one working TVM (another issue that needs attention), passengers try over and over again to buy tickets with debit cards only to have the transaction rejected. This not only frustrates them, but delays the rest of us who just want to validate. The same is true at Union Station. Please fix whatever is rejecting the debit cards, or change the signs on the TVM to say credit cards only.

VRE Management:

I'm not satisfied with the status of our TVMs. I'll work to correct the debit card trouble - the TVMs should accept them.

VRE Management:

I am surprised that although there were some, there were not more questions from Fredericksburg riders on on-time performance. Let me take this opportunity to say a few things about VRE and CSX.

- 1) I am absolutely NOT happy with the service performance that VRE riders have endured lately. It is unacceptable for riders to have these continued delays as a result of CSX switch, signal and interference problems.
 - 2) We have communicated this to CSX and they have taken the following steps as a result. A) Assigned a senior executive who's responsibility is VRE. He has pledged to work on improving on-time performance.
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VRE Management:

He will also improve communication with VRE and accelerate critical railroad improvement projects that will help VRE.

This change, which was detailed in the last VRE Update is a positive step for VRE riders. Having said that, I fully expect improvement to come as a result.

We will continue to watch the performance of VRE trains on CSX tracks very carefully. We also will work to

improve our communications with you on day to day service challenges.

VRE Management:

Thank you for spending time with us today. I look forward to seeing you again as March's lion roars in on the first!
-Dale

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