

Virginia Railway Express

Let's Talk!

The next VRE online forum will start on Wednesday, June 7th at 12 noon.



There are currently 70 questions waiting to be answered.

VRE Management:

Well, I'm back from vacation. I enjoyed reading the transcript of the last month.

In addition to getting a lot accomplished, everyone kept it light and informative. So let's start with the questions.

David from Woodbridge, VA asks:

Why do VRE employees permit passengers to stand on the train before each stop? In your publications, it specifically states to NOT queue at the exits of trains, yet it happens every day, at every stop. Why does VRE have such a blatant disregard for passenger safety?

VRE Management:

Wow that is a loaded question. We just had a discussion with someone today who was upset that he was told he had to sit before the train would move. Queuing is not a problem for passenger safety, however, it does prevent people from detraining at their correct stop. With full trains it is not feasible to require everyone to sit. However, when we see a pattern develop where people cannot detrain due to queuers, we institute a policy where the train won't move until everyone is seated. This is one of those situations with strong feelings on both sides. The standees feel that they should be able to stand whenever they want, others who don't stand or queue feel like they are being treated unfair as well.

Dave from Clifton, VA asks:

In response to a question asked last time, there is a way to help ensure that the engineers stop the trains at the same platform spot. Other commuter agencies have "cab spot" signs on the platforms and beside the tracks, with the numbers and location indicating to the engineer where to stop depending on how many cars are in his or her train. I don't find it to be a problem personally, but I guess at the elongated platform at the Park it can be tricky.

VRE Management:

This is something that we would like to do. It would require putting poles or signs on the railroad right-of-way outside each station. It has not been met with a favorable response when we brought it up.

Sheila from Brooke, VA asks:

Why is transportation so slow to expand in Virginia? VRE's progress is at a standstill and we have bear-bones commuter service compared to other cities across the U.S. Money is not as big an issue as you make it out to be, there just seems to be a lack of ambition. Don't you want more service for Virginians?

VRE Management:

I think that is an excellent question for your local legislator!

Anthony from Spotsylvania asks:

How about a quarterly ticket, due when the govt gets their quarterly metrocheks? Save printing costs and wear and tear on equipment. Plus upfront cash flow for VRE. Win Win. How about the same for those that use Amtrak?

I hate having to get 15-25 tickets all at once, get those waiting for tickets mad, as well as wear and tear on the machines.

VRE Management:

That is something that we have looked at in the past maybe a good idea to revisit it again.

Charlie from Manassas, VA asks:

Why are you buying more gallery cars? You should know that they are the most hated coaches we have -- it's obvious from looking at these chats and your surveys that very few people care for them, and mechanically I know they are sorely lacking. How do you justify buying more of these cattle cars? If these things ride like magic carpets, I will forgive you, but if they don't...(off with his head!)

VRE Management:

Wow well the problem that most people express with the Gallery cars is the lack of comfort. I believe that the new cars will address that problem, and of course they will be newer. Since we are a public agency, we held a public procurement for cars. The company that makes Gallery cars, Nippon Shario, came in with the best overall package. The value for the taxpayer and passenger dollar is significant.

Mike from Centreville, VA asks:

Can you put the "VRE -- Working Towards a Better Tomorrow" video back on the main page?

VRE Management:

Good memory that has been several years since we did that video. I will have the webmaster take a look and be sure it is still relevant and correct. If so we can repost it!

Chuck from Bumpass asks:

You claim that the company responsible for cleaning the trains used the incorrect cleaner on Kawasaki car windows, thus permanently etching them. Why have you not collected damages from the cleaner company or their insurance company in order to have the VRE car windows replaced. We are tired of look out thru cloudy windows.

VRE Management:

Im investigating replacing all windows with glass.

Emasculator from Alexandria, VA asks:

I heard VRE has an all Mensa member staff. That must be a very stimulating work place.

VRE Management:

"Emasculator" -- I certainly don't want to meet you on a platform! Mensa? I don't know about that. But definitely stimulating.

Lauri from Manassas, VA asks:

I would like to know why the decision was made yesterday morning to bypass the Manassas and Manassas Park stations in picking up the many riders who waited more than an hour for a train, only to see it go zooming by. I understand that the train stopped to pick up Burke Center passengers. Please explain why; the fares from Manassas and Manassas Park are much higher than those of Burke passengers.

VRE Management:

Once the first train was allowed to move, we knew other trains could move behind it. In order to get that first train out of the way, it was necessary to "express" it to Burke. Additionally, we knew we couldn't pick up everyone along the way. The next train was dispatched exactly 11 minutes behind the first and even after picking people up, it bumped up against the first train. We apologize for the frustration yesterday's delays caused you and everyone else on the Manassas Line.

Jeff from Bristow, VA asks:

1. I noticed that the Broad Run Parking Lots are at capacity again and people are parking on the access road. Are there any long-range plans to add another parking lot at Broad Run?

VRE Management:

With all of the housing going on in that area of Prince William County, I doubt we will ever have sufficient parking at Broad Run. Similar to the Fredericksburg station, our best hope for Broad Run is expansion, in this case to Gainesville and Haymarket, to alleviate the parking pressure at Broad Run.

Mike from Lorton, VA asks:

Why is it when VRE trains are early to a station they can't wait at that station until their scheduled departure time. If you have a set time to depart from a station and you leave early, why even have a schedule at all?? It's not like VRE trains are early or on time anyways.

VRE Management:

Trains are not permitted to leave prior to their scheduled departure time, unless there is a "D" next to the station name in the schedule, which Lorton does not. It is extremely rare for a train to leave early. As a matter of fact, coming southbound, we know that there are stations where we "wait on time."

Rance from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

Help, my train broke down again this week. How old are they away? 1950 or 1850? Are the quick fixes not lasting? Maybe the maintenance should be improved, or better yet replace the trains with new and more reliable technology. I know, I know new trains cost big bucks. Why not increase fares? You certainly haven't done that in awhile (NOT!). Just tooting your horn a little (no pun intended). I believe VRE is doing a good job with what they have to work with...and it still beats driving.

VRE Management:

We definitely need new cars, and right after that we need new engines. Thanks for writing!

Marty from Annandale, VA USA asks:

Is it true that Norfolk Southern is using a Commodore 64 with a cassette program to run the signaling system? I was told by someone 'in the know' that NS management had difficulty finding parts for the computer with the 're-boot' failure yesterday and that the twenty-two year old Commodore had to be replaced by a Commodore 64 donated to NS by the Smithsonian.

VRE Management:

Actually, this is a brand new system that NS put in earlier this year. It is state of the art and despite the bugs is a significant step up in the world of dispatching. We are confident that NS will work through their issues. We have found them to be a responsive company.

Manny from Burke, VA asks:

When at last I can park my bicycle on the new gallery cars, will I have to pay a separate fare for my bicycle if it displaces a paying passenger? If so, will my bicycle be entitled to an FRC in case of a delay?

VRE Management:

The flip up seats will be marked as bicycle priority seats. Your bike will not need to pay the extra fare, nor will it qualify for an FRC.

Roger from Fredericksburg asks:

Any update on parking at Fredericksburg?

VRE Management:

No real update. We think that we might lose some parking in lot D and lot C in the future, but have no plans to replace those spots. Were hoping that Spotsylvania will put a station there and alleviate some of the parking in Fredericksburg.

Stanko from Fredericksburg asks:

Is there any updates to a possible station south of Fredericksburg?

VRE Management:

Speaking of Spotsylvania, no new news here either. We are still negotiating with them.

Sarah from F'Burg asks:

What are you doing to PREVENT vandalism at the various parking lots? Just yesterday, I witnessed a rider walking to his car to discover that someone threw a large rock through his front windshield.

VRE Management:

The parking lots are typically owned by the jurisdiction that they are located in. We expect that those police departments will patrol and monitor the activities in the lots. When we find out about a rash of incidents, we get involved with the police to investigate the problems. If anyone has been the target of vandalism, we encourage you to contact the police and fill out our vandalism feedback form that helps us track these incidents. The form is at <http://www.vre.org/feedback/vandalismconcerns.php>.

Skeptical from Alexandria, VA asks:

Is there really a town called Bumpass, or does that location just signify Chuck's disposition?

VRE Management:

Bumpass is a real town in Virginia. :)

Alphonder from Woodbridge, VA asks:

What is the difference between a passenger and freight locomotive? They look similar.

VRE Management:

While there is a difference between the two, most of VREs locomotives are rebuilt freight locomotives. Passenger locomotives are built for speed, the thoroughbred of locomotives. Freight engines are heavier and built to haul long heavy trains, like a Clydesdale.

Todd from Bristow asks:

So my train broke down at Broad Run this morning. I began to think about the new Kawas coming in and wondered: do we get new locomotives too? And what is VRE doing to prevent the quality control issues that METRO has with their new cars? (Don't get me wrong - VRE beats METRO hands down!)

VRE Management:

New cars first. Then locomotives. We have a contractor monitoring the construction of the cars on-site in Japan and Milwaukee.

James from Falmouth asks:

2 points: (1) Why not heavily discount the ten trip tickets [basically, the pay as you go ticket] relative to the other types [monthly, 5 day pass] which are simply "use or lose" passes. What is VRE afraid of, maybe confirming that this ticket type represents the most fair and equitable ticket pass. [The argument about the TVM usage for these tickets and that they are not popular (since they are priced out of competition) with riders is bogus. (2)VRE needs to replace NOT fix the HVAC systems, they are third world rate at best.

VRE Management:

Much like other organizations, VRE prices its tickets so that the most frequent users receive the greater discount. The monthly has a 34% discount and ten-rides have an 8% discount. From a corporate perspective, the ten ride costs much more. It isn't a fairness issue, rather an economic one.

2) We have contracted with a separate HVAC company to monitor the AC. It would be prohibitive to replace every unit in the fleet. The real answer to the question is to acquire newer cars, which we are working on.

Tony from Spotsylvania asks:

What happened to the 68 questions that were in queue? That's why a forum with some historical content would be better. You could have moderators to help answer questions.

VRE Management:

I agree that it would be nice to answer all questions posed, however, there simply isn't enough time to do so. We set aside one hour each month to hold these forums, which is on par with chats you see at Washingtonpost.com and other sites. In that hour we are able to field somewhere in the neighborhood of 40-50 questions. To answer all the questions that were posed today would take almost one full work day.

However it is important to mention that in addition to our online chats, we have many other communication vehicles. We hold Meet the Managements at stations, we answer questions by e-mail, we have Train Talk, we have our website, which is the encyclopedia of VRE, and also have our onboard newsletter.

Mike from Franconia asks:

I noticed the trees and vegetable type matter along the CSX right of way were ripped and torn asunder in a violent manner. Would VRE please ask CSX to use a more humane manner to clear the tracks? Plants have feelings too. Seriously. Studies have shown that plants do suffer. PLEASE BE GENTLE!!!

VRE Management:

Railroads have thousands of miles of tracks that they need to keep clear of vegetation. While we understand your thoughts on their process, they need to do this in as efficient and cost-effective manner as possible.

Jill from Woodbridge, VA asks:

I would like to know what steps you take when a conductor abuses his/her authority?

VRE Management:

Like with any service organization, complaints against crew, or any member of my staff, is investigated. All personnel decisions are confidential and other than telling people that things are being handled, we do not divulge any more information.

Dirk from Clifton, VA asks:

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

VRE Management:

We will receive 11 new cab cars starting in November 2007. I hope to exercise an option for an additional 50 new cars by June 30th, with delivery starting July 2008.

Frank from Fredericksburg asks:

1. When will you publish the results of the latest passenger survey? 2. What's up the the terrible service for the last couple of months? Seems like service goes to the pits when the days get longer and warm weather arrives.

VRE Management:

1) Survey results will be posted on the website at the end of August after we have presented the results to our Operations Board. 2) Our on-time performance in March and April was the best that it has been in over a year. With the exception of the last 7 days in May, that month was doing well, too. We are continually working with CSX and NS to keep our trains operating in a timely manner.

Geoff from Warrenton, VA asks:

I realize this is a VDOT question, but it affects VRE ridership. Are there any plans to widen Rt28 south of the Broad Run station? I live 12 miles away and have to leave 55 minutes before the train to make it on time! Also, could the stop light at piper lane stay green longer? It's another 30 minutes to get back on 28 each night.

VRE Management:

I don't know the answer to your question, but I do know that this is an ongoing frustration for our Broad Run riders. We'll look into it and put our findings in an upcoming VRE Update.

Montague from Springfield, VA asks:

I am here stateside visiting friends and family (legally). I have paid to ride VRE on several occasions but feel since I am not a citizen I should be entitled to a free ride. I noticed there are many people in this country illegally and they get a free pass for many items I am required to pay for. I demand the same consideration.

VRE Management:

We don't need to get into the immigration/illegal alien debate here. Suffice it to say, if you ride, you pay, regardless of your political or economic status.

Jimbo from Manassas asks:

I want to ride my Segway to the train. Can I bring it onboard with me? The conductor would probably need to use the handicap lift to get it onboard.

VRE Management:

At this point we do not permit Segways on board the train.

Frank from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

Why are the train cars kept cool in the morning with air conditioning yet warm/hot in the afternoon when the temperature outside is hot - the train cars are equipped with adequate air conditioning to maintain cool temperatures but the conductors don't seem to want to use it.

VRE Management:

Actually, the conductors don't have any control over the HVAC system. The system is set to keep the interior temperature between 68-72 degrees. When it gets below 68, the heat kicks in; when it gets above 72, the a/c starts up. One thing to keep in mind is that the cars are subject to the outside temperatures. With the cool overnight temperatures, the cars tend to stay at the lower end of the setting. After sitting in the mid-day sun, the cars tend to stay warmer. However, we know that some of our Gallery cars have been having problems with the a/c. We are working on those units daily. If you notice a car that has had a consistent problem, please note the number of the car (if it's a Gallery which end) and fill out a Train Information Form - <http://www.vre.org/feedback/mechanicalconcerns.php>.

Dave from Manassas asks:

I sent an email to lost and found this morning and have yet to hear from them. How long does it take them to reply?

VRE Management:

We receive the list of what has been recovered after 12noon each day. Our Lost and Found staff is usually very good about contacting people within 24 hours. If you haven't heard something by tomorrow, please call our office and ask for one of our Lost and Found divas.

Holly from Broad Run asks:

Here's my 2-cents regarding the Gallery cars. I love them! The seats are comfortable and have more leg room than any other style of car. And for the most part, you don't have to awkwardly sit knee-to-knee with another passenger. The seat backs on the other cars are too straight for those of us who choose to sleep during our

commute, causing that awful head-bob-and-jerk effect that has resulted in many a sore neck for me. Plus, the Gallery cars offer the up-top single row seating, allowing a little privacy and elbow room after a long day. These are my favorite cars. Thanks for keeping them!

VRE Management:

Thanks, but you are in the minority. For the rest of you, we tush tested seats for the new cars again today and our back sides are very pleased with what we found. These new seats not only have headrest but also a padded movable armrest between the seats.

Greg from Rippon asks:

Can we get extra bug zappers at Rippon? The bugs are already out in force!

VRE Management:

We currently have 4 zappers at Rippon. 3 of them were shot out last week and we just finished replacing them. We also have a bat house on the back of the tower that has the elevator to keep the bugs under control. Well monitor the bug population for the next week or so and reassess whether we need more.

Janet from Fredericksburg VA asks:

Can you upgrade the ticket machines to let us purchase more step-up tickets at a time? My credit card is wearing out. Thank you.

VRE Management:

You can purchase more at one time at a vendor. We are looking into letting our TVMs do the same thing.

Dave from Woodbridge, VA asks:

What was the medical emergency on Train #307 at Springfield last Wednesday?

VRE Management:

I know that, especially because the train was delayed for so long, that many are curious about the nature of the medical emergency. For privacy reasons, all we can tell you is that she is doing fine and it was not a life-threatening incident. The real problem was in the length of time that it took EMS to respond. We have investigated why this happened and are working with all of the parties involved to shorten the response time.

Donald from Woodbridge, VA asks:

What is the status of the damaged Kawaski cars that derailed 6 months ago?

VRE Management:

The 3 cars that did not derail were returned to service fairly quickly. 1 of the 2 derailed cars has been returned to service. The remaining 2 are waiting for completely rebuilt trucks (where the wheels are located), which requires extensive testing.

Frank from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

Why are there heat restrictions on the Fredericksburg line and not on the Manassas line? What is being done to resolve the heat restriction issue?

VRE Management:

Every railroad meets the challenges of their tracks and terrain in different, but equally effective, ways. Heat restrictions is one area where CSX and Norfolk Southern differ in philosophy. However, it does seem that every year, the guidelines to when CSX will impose heat restrictions change. We have asked them to give us a statement delineating what conditions will cause them to go into effect. We are currently waiting for their response.

Darleen from Warrenton VA asks:

Love the VRE - "a bad day on the VRE is better than a good day on the Interstate or Beltway." Who is responsible

for maintaining the railway right-of-way? The view is marred by tons of trash all along the route.

VRE Management:

Thank you so much. The right of way is owned and maintained by the host railroad. With thousands and thousands of miles of railroad, trash pick up is not necessarily a high priority. :(

Brian from Manassas Park asks:

After a southbound train leaves the Manassas Park station, the train will get almost to the Manassas Dr. crossing before the crossing gates go down. The train will blow the horn 3 or 4 times upon leaving the station, but for safety purposes, shouldn't the gates go down maybe 10 seconds or so before that?

VRE Management:

Because of the proximity of the station to the road, the road crossing is predicted by a motion sensor. It closes the gates based on the speed of the train so that the gates close 30 seconds before the train arrives at the road. Because our trains have stopped and are just starting to move, the gates close when the train, distance-wise, is fairly close to the road, but still at least 30 seconds away.

Ethan from Woodbridge, VA asks:

Does VRE have any plans to run southbound trains later in the evening? I am about to start a job where I will have to work from 8am to at least 8pm most days. Without a later train, I will have to stop riding VRE altogether. In Boston and NY the last commuter rail leaves well after 9 or 10pm. Thank you.

VRE Management:

We dont have plans to add any trains at this time, but when we are able, we will definitely poll the riders and see what would be most advantageous to them. Right now lots of Fredericksburg riders have petitioned for an early early morning train (before 300) and the Manassas riders are clamoring for a later evening train.

Bev from Burke VA asks:

I was wondering if you plan to add more buses and bus stops, once they start working on the parking lot at Burke Center Station in July?

VRE Management:

We just had a meeting on the Burke Deck construction. Right now the work is estimated to begin in late September, early October. There will be one satellite lot with a shuttle and the Fairfax Connector Bus system is reviewing the current EZ bus routes to see if they are optimal for this project. Look for more information on the plans in August.

Sally from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

I do not use the METRO etc. Can I get a handicap ticket from the VRE Office on King street? I will not go down to DC for any reason.

VRE Management:

Because our office is so small and we do not have an ADA expert on staff, we have chosen to piggy back on Metros program. They are better equipped to assist people and determine who qualifies. However, if you have a Medicaid card or a VA card, you can use that as well.

Dave from Manassas asks:

I've been clamoring for years to allow trains to bypass stations when, for whatever reason, they become way overcrowded. I was told this cannot happen. Then yesterday on the Manassas line that's exactly what happened. Why not have a consistent policy?

VRE Management:

The policy is not inconsistent, we only do it when we know that the next train is operating a few minutes behind it. If the next train isn't going to operate relatively quickly and be able to pick up the bypassed people, we don't put this plan into place.

DT from Bristow asks:

For Geoff from Warrenton: PWC has a bond referendum coming up this year to widen 28 up to about 1 mile from the Fauquier border. The roads will be paid for by PWC residents if they approve it.

VRE Management:

Geoff, here's your answer. Thanks, DT.

Allen from Woodbridge asks:

I thought the new cab cars were first coming in November of 06 and put in service early 2007.

VRE Management:

Oops! A typo in an earlier question. You are correct, it is November 2006, going into service in early 2007.

Wesley from spotsy asks:

Yeah, I want to commend the Lost and Found Divas - have you thought about a calendar to raise much needed funds for the VRE. On the serious side - I lost my cell phone and the Lost and Found Divas were able to get it back for me. Believe it or not, it hadn't been used to call Russia, either.

VRE Management:

Thank you, we'll pass your idea around.

Rachel from Dale City, VA asks:

My daughter participated in the emergency rehearsal last month and said it was a total farce. She was marked as critically injured and the EMT told her she could get up and climb up the hill. She also noticed that many of the EMT's were confused and didn't follow the protocol laid out for such an emergency. One "injured" person was left in the train car until several other people spoke up loud enough. She laid in the cold train car for 3 1/2 hours before someone came to "rescue" her. If her injuries were real, she would have died before they came.

VRE Management:

There is no doubt, having heard the results of the after action meeting, there were a lot of lessons learned from the drill. All responders are reviewing their procedures.

Tony from Spotsylvania asks:

FYI - The reason I queue to get off is because I value my life more than VRE and the conductors do. Many passengers try to get up front to get off early and they stand on the train with cigarette and lighter in hand. When I disembark I want air that is cigarette smoke free. Ban the cigarette smoking on the platforms and I'll bet the queuing decreases - at least by 1. Same with boarding - I try and arrive before the hoardes of smoke generators do so I don't have to cut thru the smoke to get on the platform.

VRE Management:

Karen from Manassas asks:

Your reply to David about queuing was wishy washy. Queuing continues to be a major problem. The conductors know who the queuers are; and they could make announcements more often to help prevent it. The fact that you had to talk to a queuer who was upset about having to sit is not an excuse for not addressing the problem. I've missed my stop at Manassas because of Broad Run queuers and there really is no good excuse for this. Please develop a policy and enforce it all the time.

VRE Management:

VRE Management:

As you can see by the dichotomy of the last two questions, there is significant emotion on both sides of this issue. Our policy is that when a problem develops so that people cannot detrain, the conductor will notify VRE

management and the policy that people must sit will be instituted. We try to use this policy judiciously so that trains that do not have a problem are not unfairly treated. We know all of you feel strongly on this issue and are working with our crews to resolve this in a way that benefits as many people as possible.

VRE Management:

Thanks to everybody who posted questions for today. To those of you who inquire why we answer questions that some consider inane, the answer is that we try not only to answer serious questions, but to keep this forum entertaining reading. Like with any good non-fiction book, some humor needs to be injected.

Sometimes as we answer these questions, the answers may seem abrupt or cavalier, but rest assured, it's the medium of the typed word, versus the spoken word, that may make it seem that I don't take your comments and questions as serious as some would like. Everything that I am able to answer, as well as those questions that I don't answer, are taken into account. Sometimes, the questions that we are not able to answer are referred to an appropriate manager for appropriate study and managing.

VRE Management:

I want to wish everyone a wonderful summer. Our next forum is scheduled for September 6. If you need anything before then, feel free to see us at Meet the Management or drop us a line.

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