

Virginia Railway Express

Let's Talk!

The next VRE online forum will start on Wednesday, May 10th at 12 noon.



There are currently 66 questions waiting to be answered.

VRE Management:

Good afternoon. I am Jennifer Straub, Deputy CEO of VRE.

As we have told you, our CEO is away on vacation this week, and Sirel and I have courageously volunteered to answer your questions for the next hour.

Sirel is our Director of Construction and Facilities and is well versed to answer all of your questions on projects both in progress and on the books.

Before we jumped in this afternoon, thank you to all of you who filled out our surveys this morning. If you haven't had a chance you can still fill it out online.

John from Bristow, VA asks:

In recent news about real estate development in Gainesville, the creation of a Gainesville VRE station was again mentioned. Certainly there are a lot of "ifs" involved and the project is many years away, but has VRE started planning on how such a station would impact the Manassas line? Obviously the same train can't service the Broad Run station AND Gainesville since they are on different rail lines. Would a separate smaller rail vehicle shuttle between Old Town Manassas and either Gainesville or Broad Run?

VRE Management:

Sirel: We have received state and federal funds to start studying the Gainesville/Haymarket extension. The exact method of operations will be determined once the study has been completed.

don from Fredericksburg asks:

With Fredericksburg Glass renovating their Princess Anne street building (adjacent to Parking Lot "D") - what happens to the parking spaces in Lot "D". Will VRE riders lose access to the parking spaces, and if so, when?

VRE Management:

Sirel: Right now, we don't know for sure. We have not been given a schedule for the loss of additional spaces in Lot D. But it is possible that we will lose some more of these spaces. As soon as we are told more, we will be sure to let you know.

Leroy from Fredricksburg, Va asks:

I would like to suggest that a casino car be created on each train and this car could also sell alcoholic beverages. This would help supplement the VRE income and offset some of the large yearly fare increases we receive.

VRE Management:

Jennifer: As long as our staff gets reserved seats, I'll be happy to implement it! :) I am sure when our CEO returns from vacation though, he won't approve the project. But seriously, we are always looking for innovative ideas on how to increase our non-fare revenue and appreciate your suggestion.

Chris from Burke, VA asks:

What is the deal with the Burke Center Parking Facility? I am new to the area (and walk to the VRE Station), and I have only heard things tangentially about it. Is there more information available, or a timeline? Thanks

VRE Management:

Sirel: The County has finalized the design for a new parking garage. They have submitted the plans to VDOT for approval. Construction is expected to start this fall. We are still working with the County on how this will affect the riders once construction starts and will be coming out with more information over the summer on what you can expect. In fact, we will see if we can post some of the design drawings in the center panel of the information board at the station in the next few weeks.

Em from Stafford, VA asks:

I lost a valuable and sentimental item on a VRE train, filled out a Lost Item Report and was told that the item was not recovered. What are my possible next steps? Can I post "reward" signs in the train on which I was riding when I lost the item?

VRE Management:

Jennifer: We are sorry to hear that we were not able to locate your item. Our return rate is roughly 70%. However, there are times that for whatever reason something appears several weeks later. Unfortunately, we cannot permit you to post reward signs on our trains.

Rich from Bristow asks:

What do the conductors/engineers do between the morning and evening train runs?

VRE Management:

Jennifer: There is a rest area where our trains are parked during the day for our crews. During this time, they are free to do whatever they want. Some have memberships to a gym, some sleep, some read.

Emily from Lorton asks:

I see a lot of talk on here about how terrible the on time performance (OTP) has been lately and I have to say that I have been very pleased the past month with the performance. I ride 304 in the AM and I couldn't be happier with the service. I wanted VRE to have a compliment this time but I'm sure those negative nillies out there will find something to complain about. Thanks VRE.

VRE Management:

Jennifer: Thank you. On-time performance has improved over the past two months. I hope we are not jinxing it by talking about it here. I will be sure to pass your kudos on those people making it happen.

Jim from Burke, VA asks:

How will parking be handled at the Burke Centre station during construction of the new parking garage?

VRE Management:

Sirel: Most of the existing parking will be retained during construction. In addition, a nearby parking lot will be used to shuttle riders to the station.

Stephen from Falmouth, Va. asks:

This is a quandry. When the passenger next to me is snoring louder than a train horn, what should I do? Seating is so crowded I can't move. Do I dare nudge him, or endure the pain? Is it bad enough with all the people wheezing and gasping in the car.

VRE Management:

Jennifer: That certainly is a quandary. The only option we can think of is to find another seat. If the car is too crowded, seats may be available in a different part of the train. Then, take a mental note not to sit next to that person in the future.

Chuck from Bumpass asks:

When will VRE revert to the 15 minute-late standard now that CSX signal and tie work is completed. VRE and CSX seem to be taking a very cavalier attitude towards delays lately, particularly in afternoon Fredericksburg trains. I cannot remember the last last time 307 was on time according to schedule. Or maybe you should revise your schedule to reflect reality.

VRE Management:

Jennifer: With the exception of the tie work last summer, the FRC program has always been 30 minutes or more. The real question, I think, is about improving our on-time performance. We are steadily doing that. Our overall OTP on the Fredericksburg line in both March and April was 85%, significantly better than the 50% we were seeing last summer. Train #307 boasted an OTP of 95% in April. Even with these numbers, we are continuing to work with CSX to see where more improvements can be made.

Jeff from Woodbridge asks:

How come pretty ladies get to ride for free? I mean they are quite attractive so I can see why so that may have just answered my own question and boy do I mean ATTRACTIVE. oooooeoooo

VRE Management:

Sirel: Which trains are you referring to? I will be happy to PERSONALLY look into this one myself. Seriously, please email the train numbers you see this on so we can look into this.

Alphonder from Woodbridge, VA asks:

Are the seats in the new gallery cars like the ones in the Kawasaki cars? They look similar in the picture

VRE Management:

Jennifer: The seats in the new Gallery cars share characteristics of both the Kawasaki cars and the Sounder cars. They are roughly the same height as the Sounders and have individual backs like the Kawasakis. Staff have "test sat" these seats and have found them very comfortable.

Bob from Stafford, VA asks:

When will the cars that were damaged in the January derailment be back in service?

VRE Management:

Jennifer: Three of the six cars have been placed back into service. The three that were derailed are still waiting for some work on the trucks.

Jim from DC asks:

please tell me why you continue to send long emails to phones that cannot handle messages of any length??? you need to separate out those devices that can handle a long email and those that cannot...if nothing else, give the subscriber the ability to say short messages only. My mobile device buzzes and I get a truncated notice to all subscribers...and limited else...tell me in as few words as possible what you want me to do...I shouldn't have to log into my computer to find out what the story is.

VRE Management:

Jennifer: This could be caused by a few different things. Your best option is to call and speak with one of our customer advocates who can help you find a solution to this.

Marty from Fredericksburg asks:

Is any progress being made in getting Spotsylvania to join the program?

VRE Management:

Jennifer: Still no news. Negotiations are still underway. When we have more information, we'll share it.

Saving Gas from Haymarket, VA asks:

Can VRE provide some sort of dedicated motorcycle parking in the current facilities, like Metro does?? With increasing gas prices, a number of us driving to the station would ride our motorcycle if parking was available.

VRE Management:

Jennifer: We have recently completed a study on access to the stations. One of the recommendations is to have dedicated motorcycle parking. We are currently looking into this.

Terry from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

At the Alexandria Station, can you please add a speaker and streaming marquee message board to the south side of the platform? Those of us who wait on that end of the platform are "in the dark". Thanks.

VRE Management:

Sirel: We are working on replacing the PA system and message signs system wide. The issue at the Alexandria station is something that we are looking into as part of this project.

John from Manassas, VA asks:

Is there anything that can be done to get train # 326 to consistently stop at the same place at the Manassas Park station? It is often off by as much as an entire car length causing overcrowding on some cars and consternation amongst we habit bound riders as we chase the car we normally ride on down the platform.

VRE Management:

Jennifer: There currently not is a mechanism for consistent stopping points for the trains because each train is a different length. They cannot put markers on the tracks to designate stopping points. We understand that this is frustrating, but at this time we don't have a solution.

Hank from Fairfax, Va asks:

Below is a Poem I would like to share with everyone: How I hate my Sounder When ridding in my Sounder, I feel like I am packed in can like sardines and flounder. When leaving my seat I often bang my head on the luggage shelf, then I wish that I had drove in to work, all by myself. When sitting in my seat there is no room for my knees, when exiting my seat it is hard to get by other passengers even if I say please. The seats are so hard and straight, the extra time spent in them is really agonizing when the train is late. The person in the seat facing me is sometimes looking at me and starring, it makes me wonder if there is something wrong with the clothing I am wearing. There is no room to rest my elbows when I am in my seat, the person sitting across from me is often upset because I am stepping on their feet. If the person sitting across from me is coughing and wheezing, I will soon be off from work because of a sore throat and sneezing. The only type of person that could like these Sounder cars, is someone from a far away planet, such as Mars. It would be oh so very great, if we could just send these cars back to Washington State.

VRE Management:

Jennifer: Thanks for the poem. While Sirel says I should answer in the form of a poem, I am not that creative on the spot. We have been advised by Sounder that one set may be recalled this summer with the second set going back in late 2007.

Crystal from Bristow, VA asks:

Can VRE post the governmental agencies that run it?

VRE Management:

Jennifer: VRE is operated by a staff of 36 who are listed on our website. Information on VRE's parent commissions (NVTC and PRTC) are also listed on our website in the "About" section.

Brian from Fredericksburg asks:

Why do people feel entitled to smoke on the stairwells and near the entrance at the Fredericksburg station, in addition to smoking on the platform? Can you please get some no smoking signs in place?

VRE Management:

Sirel: I noticed that this morning when I was at the station for the survey. I'll look into what we can do to put signage in those areas.

Larry from Fredericksburg asks:

Any chance of having a quiet car at EACH end of the train? If the answer is no, could you do a survey? Thanks.

VRE Management:

Jennifer: Several times each year, we count the number of passengers in the quiet cars. At last count, the ridership does not support adding a quiet car. Not to mention that quiet cars, while they have their supporters, also have a number of people who don't approve of them. Right now, the plan is to keep one per train.

Dan from Quantico asks:

If VRE had say a dozen TVs donated to them would they install them on the trains? Let me take that a step further. Can you install them and provide cable?

VRE Management:

Jennifer: We tried it in the past, but because we travel through some remote areas, the bunny ears just didn't work. If in the future, one provider proves able to supply uninterrupted service, it would certainly be a passenger amenity that we would consider.

Frustrated from Leeland Road Station asks:

Within the past two weeks one of the machines used to validate my 10-trip ticket did so incorrectly by printing the next validation man spaces below the previous validation. This leaves my ticket useless and cost me approximately 5 rides. This is a significant loss to someone on a budget. How can I recoup these losses?

VRE Management:

Jennifer: Please contact E.B. Easter in our Customer Service department. He will be happy to replace your ticket.

@ Stephen from Falmouth from VA asks:

You can nudge me, I don't mind. :-)

VRE Management:

Jennifer: I guess our courtesy campaign is working. :)

Anonymous for a reason from VA asks:

Please answer this one: May I use the PA system on the train one morning to propose to my girlfriend? We met on the train and I thought that would be fitting. Thanks in advance.

VRE Management:

Jennifer: You lucked out asking a woman for permission to do something romantic for a proposal. Seriously, call Wendy Lemieux to discuss your options. We'd like to help you with this special occasion.

Dave from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

The solution to train #326, or any train, for that matter, stopping at the same spot everyday is to just live with it. There is no reason those folks who get to the station early can't walk to the doors. They seem to think they have a right to board first and get their "reserved" seat.

VRE Management:

Jennifer: The other side of the story.

Dan from Gainesville, VA asks:

Jennifer: We have recently completed a study on access to the stations. Will this study be posted on your

website?

VRE Management:

Jennifer: Yes, a presentation is being prepared for our Operations Board. Once that has occurred we will post this information on the website.

John from Fairfax Station, VA asks:

Has VRE considered altering train consists mid-day to deal with crowding on certain evening runs? For example, an 8-car and a 6 car morning consist could be reconfigured as two 7-car consists for evening service.

VRE Management:

Jennifer: Operationally, this is more difficult than it sounds. In addition, 7 car sets would also require an extra crew member and as a result more money. We are always looking at the ridership to see how we can best accommodate our riders and make changes periodically.

Bruce from Burke, VA asks:

If I get a license from the state and local jurisdictions may I vend food and office supply items from car to car? If not, to whom would I need to petition?

VRE Management:

Jennifer: While we admire your ambition and creativity, we are not in a position to allow someone to walk from car to car selling items. Even when we did have café cars on the trains, they were stationary. However, this is not an area that we are interested in exploring at this time.

Cathy from King and Queen VA asks:

How long will the Springfield elevators be out of service?

VRE Management:

Jennifer: The elevator has just been put back into service. We'll send a Train Talk out shortly.

Marie from Manassas Park asks:

How is VRE going to correct the down-ward spiral caused by insufficient past planning which has resulted in VRE's current insufficient funds, facilities, & equipment, when there's not enough \$\$ to even meet the needs (not desires) of today?! This doesn't bode well for the longevity of the system.

VRE Management:

Jennifer: I wouldn't agree that we are in a down-ward spiral. Our on-time performance in improving. We are on the brink of some financial arrangements that will allow us to purchase 50 brand new rail cars. While there are some puzzle pieces that are yet to be put into place, VRE is poised for the long haul.

Mike from Lorton, VA asks:

Increasingly, I have noticed that some riders have extended cell phone conversations (10+ minutes) which disrupt the people around them. While quiet conversations with others on the train or short phone calls (e.g., to tell a family member when you will be home) are understandable, most would agree that extended use of a cell phone in a confined space is simply rude. Short of banning cell phones or creating more Quiet cars, does VRE have any plans to encourage more courtesy on its trains, perhaps through signs or by having conductors ask people to limit their phone use?

VRE Management:

Jennifer: Courtesy is always a tough area to work on because there really is no legal means to enforce courteous behavior. Part of the advantage of riding VRE is the ability to conduct business or take care of other things that could not be done while driving. Unfortunately, some people are not aware that their conversations or prolonged cell phone use are disturbing others. We do conduct courtesy campaigns from time to time. Since it has been a while since our last one, it may be time to look into another one in the near future.

Bev from Burke, VA asks:

Can the conductors ask for ID and start handing out warning tickets for riding without a valid ticket? Then VRE could start a list, that way when someone is given a warning for the second, third, fourth, fifth time, they would get a ticket and fine. It's got to be hard for the conductors to remember the faces of the violators.

VRE Management:

Jennifer: While we understand your position, technically warnings are not permitted. Our policy is that anyone without a valid ticket is to be issued a summons to appear in court. We know that some of our conductors follow policy very closely, while others use more discretion. Because of our policy, we cannot create a warning list.

Dirk from Clifton, VA asks:

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

VRE Management:

Jennifer: The 11 cab cars that we have purchased are currently in production. We expect to get the first few in late this year. After testing and training, they should be in revenue service in early 2007. The 50 new rail cars are very close to becoming a reality for us. We are in the process of finalizing some last details and hope to have good news in the next few weeks.

Carla from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

Some agencies in the U.S. (even our Metro) and in Europe have wrapped their passenger cars with painted advertisements. Have you explored this avenue for revenue supplementation?

VRE Management:

Jennifer: We have explored this possibility and continue to look for vendors. The problem is that outside of the destination stations, there is very little visibility for those not actually on the train. This reduces the desirability of wrapping our trains.

Jeremy from Manassas, VA asks:

Can you PLEASE change the format of the ticket machines to accept cash and to vend discounted tickets?

VRE Management:

Jennifer: We hear you. We purposefully made a choice not to accept cash as our stations are unmanned. We were concerned about the possibility of vandalism and theft. Likewise, it is difficult for a machine to determine who is eligible for a reduced fare tickets. Because conductors are not always able to check every ticket every day, we do need this form of checks and balances.

Jorge from Fairfax, VA asks:

Is there some reason why every year you fail to take advantage of extra revenue by not running trains to D.C. during the Cherry Blossom Festival?

VRE Management:

Jennifer: We have looked into the possibility, but do not believe that the amount of people who would ride the train would sufficiently offset the cost of providing that service. In a time of tight budgets, we have chosen to stick to our core business – commuter service.

Cathy from Lorton, VA asks:

Though it is happening less often, when the trains are late I would like to be able to get some snacks. Why don't you put vending machines on the platforms?

VRE Management:

Sirel: This is something we would like to do. Unfortunately, it would require permission from CSX and we would have to amend our Memorandum of Understanding with them. We are continuing to look into it.

Glenn from Manassas, VA asks:

Prior to arrival at Alexandria on train #327 the conductor announces, "If you need assistance detraining, please exit where you see a member of the crew." My question is, if one is handicapped to the point of needing assistance and they are two or three cars from the nearest crew member, how would they be expected to make their way through those cars and locate a member of the crew who by now would likely be on the ground before the train departs? By the way, other than this minor curiosity, your crews are doing a great job.

VRE Management:

Jennifer: Thank you for your compliments on the train crews, I will be sure to forward that on. To alleviate your curiosity, most people who have disabilities and need assistance board where the conductor is. However, because the platform at Alexandria is lower than our other platforms, others who don't normally need assistance may need a step stool to help them detrain. In this instance, they will need to detrain where the crew is.

Greg from Dumfries, VA asks:

Can anything be done to alleviate the standing of passengers on train 307? I think some people actually prefer to stand then to try and find a seat. Problem is they end up making it harder for others to get in and out of the cars.

VRE Management:

Jennifer: Queuing is a problem on many of our trains. The problem lies in the fact that bottlenecks are created in the parking lots as many people try to leave the same place at once. We'll work with Amtrak and the crew of that train to see if we can find a good solution. One that has worked on several other trains is a "standing means detraining" policy where the train does not leave a station unless everyone is seated. Unfortunately, this could be more difficult to determine on an 8-car set like 307 than on some of our smaller 5-car sets.

Opal from Stafford, VA asks:

If I may add to a question asked last time, I think VRE would be doing themselves a service to promote travel to Crystal City and the airport. All that is needed is a platform on the other track, counter-flow trains making the stop, and an EZ Bus shuttle to the airport meeting all trains for people to take a more "luggage-friendly" option than a taxi or the Metro.

VRE Management:

Jennifer: That is a great idea, but would take a significant investment to create. At this time, we are concentrating our limited funding on other areas. We do have suggestions on traveling to the area airports using VRE on our website. You might find these helpful.

Bob from Woodbridge, va asks:

If I may be so bold, this is a two-fer. 1. Are we ever going to see a wholly owned VRE track? 2. Since fuel so greatly influences ticket prices, will lowered fuel prices mean lowered ticket prices?

VRE Management:

Jennifer: 1. Probably not. In addition to the railroads not being interested in selling, owning the tracks comes with a whole host of other issues that we are not prepared to tackle, like dispatching trains and maintenance. With our staff of 35, this is not an option. 2. Fuel prices may be going down at the moment, but they are still significantly higher than they used to be and are still volatile. Until the market stabilizes at a lower price, we do not see the cost of tickets being lowered in direct relation to gas prices.

Mike from Spotsy asks:

The parking situation in Freddie is terrible. Recently, VRE changed a lot to restrict it to City residents only. This was to pressure us in Spotsy, and I doubt it is legal. We provide most of your fare revenue from the traffic originating in Fredericksburg. I know of no other business that decides to treat its principal customer base like freeloading scammers. Either that, or you're engaged in lobbying via pressure. But if Spotsy agrees to join VRE, when will the abuse cease? When you get the check? When the new rail station is built? Never?

VRE Management:

Sirel: Mike, we understand your frustration. Certainly, you can understand the frustration of your fellow passengers who pay both taxes to a jurisdiction that pays for VRE and for their own ticket. The City of

Fredericksburg requested that an additional parking lot be set aside for their residents, and because Lot C was not created nor leased from federal funding, we can restrict who parks there. This is not the case in many of our lots. Because the parking situation in Fredericksburg is not ideal, we opted to set aside 38 spaces for residents from participating jurisdictions. However, even if we had not done so, many of our passengers would be in the same parking situation they are in now.

Steffie from **Lorton, VA** asks:

May I bring my little puppy Snuggles with me on the train? She stays in my purse & wouldn't bother anyone. Please.

VRE Management:

Jennifer: As a dog person, I'd like to say yes. The policy is that small pets are permitted as long as they are in a pet carrier. Look in the Riders Guide for details on this policy.

VRE Management:

Jennifer: Hey, that wasn't so bad! Our hour is up and I am glad that we were able to answer so many of your questions on a variety of subject matters. I am happy to say that Dale will be back for the forum in June. But Sirel and I enjoyed filling in for him. Hopefully, he agrees with all of our answers so we can come back and chat with you again sometime.

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