

# Virginia Railway Express

## Let's Talk!

The next VRE online forum will start on Wednesday, November 8th at 12 noon.



There are currently 57 questions waiting to be answered.

### **VRE Management:**

Good afternoon! Thanks for joining me on this rainy day. It's hard to believe a month has passed already, so let's get on to the questions!

---

### **Fredericksburg Rider from Fredericksburg, VA asks:**

Good Afternoon, My questions is in regards to sanitation of the restrooms. I usually ride train #307 that leaves Union Station at 4:45pm. The restroom on this car always reaks of old urine, as if the restrooms aren't cleaned properly. Please keep in mind that the restroom arrives from the yard in this condition. And to make matter worse, the faucet that should be used to wash hands, is NOT fully functional and only sparingly emits water. Can you please work on this issue as soon as possible for this could lead to plethora of health concerns. Thanks in advance!

### **VRE Management:**

I will immediately have our maintenance crews look into the situation.

---

### **Gary from Culpeper, VA asks:**

Are there any plans to possibly extend VRE service out to Culpeper?

### **VRE Management:**

We are always interested in new ways that we can expand our existing service for our passengers. The possibility of service to the Culpeper area is currently being explored but, as of yet, no formal plans exist. Feel free to visit our website at <http://www.vre.org/about/strategic/strategic-plan.pdf>.

---

### **Tony from Spotsylvania VA asks:**

Sure would be nice if the conductors did a door check before leaving the FBurg yard. Especially train 300 - I report doors not opening on V604 but they never get acknowledged until 1-2 weeks later. With the inclement weather coming it's nice to know the doors will open so we don't get soaked waiting to board. Happened today too! Sure hope the same doesn't happen with restrooms.

### **VRE Management:**

As each mechanical issue is brought to the attention of our mechanical crews, every effort is made to resolve it before the next day's service. Manually opening the doors is not a quick task. If the doors are malfunctioning, the conductor has to manually open the doors after the train comes to a complete stop. Once all of the passengers board, the conductor will have to walk through the train and manually close the doors before the train leaves the station. We believe no attempt was made to open the doors in the interest of saving time.

---

### **Deedee from Manassas asks:**

I know that the train can't wain on everyone and there is a schedule but, the other morning there was an accident which made me a little late for the train. I was running across the parking lot and was approximately 100 feet from

the train and the conductor looked right at me and motioned the train to move out and I didn't make it. Needless to say, I drove to work instead of waiting another half hour. You lost revenue and I'm now issuing a lot of negative comments to future customers. Would 10 seconds have mattered that much?

**VRE Management:**

This is one of those difficult situations that our conductors often have to face. Past experience has shown that once our conductors hold the train for one passenger, another passenger appears. Doing this at every station can make the train 10 to 15 minutes late into Union Station. We are committed to staying on schedule. I've said it before, they don't even wait for me.

---

**David from Spotsylvania, VA asks:**

I would first like to thank your staff for finding my ticket and responding so quickly to my online lost ticket report. I had a question regarding the parking spaces that will be lost at Fredericksburg when leases expire. Can you tell me where these lots are? Also, I think it is unfair to suggest that paying \$4 a day at the local parking lot is an alternative. Are there any plans to find additional free spaces?

**VRE Management:**

You're welcome. We're glad your ticket was found and returned to you so quickly.

We will lose some spaces in lots D and F, and possibly lot C, but not until at least next year. There will be no further expansion of parking in Fredericksburg, but parking is available at the Fredericksburg garage. The majority of riders at Fredericksburg are from Spotsylvania County, which does not pay any funding for VRE. Until a station can be built in Spotsylvania, parking at the Fredericksburg station will be at a premium.

---

**Jeff from Bristow, VA asks:**

Every month there are more questions that are not answered. Why not answer them later and post them on the feedback website?

**VRE Management:**

I'll try to answer as many as I can today, but I only have an hour to spend with you at this time. We are working to revamp the FAQ page on our website, and we will see if we can answer some of our more common questions there.

---

**Doug from Burke, VA asks:**

Congratulations on solving the problem of overcrowding on the trains. I no longer worry about getting a seat. Also, congratulations on improving the on-time service. I've noticed how the lower number of free ride certificates is increasing my commuting cost. On a more serious note, I'm interested in whether you think there will be a fare increase next year. I've mixed feelings about it; an increase will keep the train from getting as overcrowded as it was, but, in the absence of more free ride certificates, it will make the riders pay for the empty space.

**VRE Management:**

We are still developing the budget for Fiscal Year 2008, which starts on 1 July 2007. No decision has been made on whether or not we will or will not have a fare increase. Ultimately, that is a board decision which could be made in December.

---

**Patrick from Fredericksburg asks:**

On average, how many riders are there on the Fredericksburg line per day? Thanks.

**VRE Management:**

There are approximately 7,700 trips made on the Fredericksburg line each day. This translates into about 3,850 people making one round trip each.

---

**Kevin from Woodbridge, VA asks:**

Mr. Zehner, I saw that the VRE has changed the train configuration/type for the Fredericksburg train 308 in the morning. This morning was standing room only from Woodbridge north, which is very unusual. Have you reduced the overall capacity for that train, and if so, why?

**VRE Management:**

We sent a Train Talk on Monday. Due to some routine maintenance, we had to change some of our trainsets around. This is temporary and train 308 should return to normal next week.

---

**JL from Fredericksburg, VA asks:**

Will VRE ever consider an express train from Fredericksburg straight to Union Station.

**VRE Management:**

An idea has been proposed to me and I am seriously looking at it. But having said that, it will have to be negotiated with CSX, and I cannot speculate on that outcome at this time.

---

**Nicole from Fredericksburg, VA asks:**

Why was the schedule changed on Oct. 30?

**VRE Management:**

Traditionally, we look at our schedules twice per year around the time of the time changes. We took a hard look at our schedule to see where we could make improvements. In some places we eliminated dwell time, in other cases we changed the schedule to reflect the realistic running times of the trains. We will see how it goes, and will make any adjustments that are necessary next spring.

---

**THP from Stafford, VA asks:**

Are there plans to have an early train leaving Union Station before the 12:55 leaves?

**VRE Management:**

We have no plans to add a train before 12:55p at this time.

---

**AS from Fredericksburg, VA asks:**

When is the last day we can use the old FRC's?

**VRE Management:**

We are happy with how the exchanges have been progressing, and at this time we are ready to announce the deadline for the "old" FRCs. They will no longer be valid for use after December 1, 2006.

---

**Gasping in SW from Manassas asks:**

Now that Governor Kaine has shown the political courage to ban smoking in State buildings and vehicles, do you have the courage to take the considerably less audacious step of moving the smoking area at the L'Enfant station away from the staircase and the ticket machines? You cannot enter the station from the North end or use the ticket machines there without having your health assaulted by what every responsible expert now recognizes is dangerous secondhand state. IF the governor of a tobacco state can do it, so can you. If you don't, make no pretense of concern for your riders' health.

**VRE Management:**

I understand your concerns but Governor Kaine's initiative is for inside buildings and vehicles. Because our stations are located outside, we cannot prohibit smoking. We can only designate an area for smokers to congregate as a matter of courtesy.

---

**Donna from Springfield asks:**

Are you considering a late morning Manassas train going North? I sure miss that train!!

**VRE Management:**

I know a lot of people miss train 334, and I would like to put it back into service, but it's purely a question of

money, which we do not have. So the answer is, at this time, no. That said, I am working to get additional operating funds.

---

**JP from Richmond, VA** asks:

Any news about GRTC offering services to VRE customers catching the train in Fredericksburg.

**VRE Management:**

GRTC is finalizing some details. We hope to have some information in the next few weeks.

---

**S. Lennon from Stafford** asks:

I'm quite pleased that the Fredricksburg line is finally running on schedule! Please don't change a thing! Thanks.

**VRE Management:**

We're glad you noticed. A lot of people at VRE and CSX have worked hard to make this happen. We are continuing to watch our service closely, and VRE and CSX remain committed to do the things necessary within our funding to keep the trains on time.

---

**judith from King George** asks:

I love VRE but have one major complaint. You don't provide service on "Federal" holidays. The day after Thanksgiving is NOT a Federal holiday, but you have decided not to offer service that day either. As a public transport, you are obligated to provide service on all days, I believe. Many of us non-Federal workers must work on some of those holidays and have no way to get to work. Could you possibly run one train on each line on those days for folks like me?

**VRE Management:**

Ridership and funding drive the decisions on which days we do and do not operate. In years' past, we have operated a limited service "S" schedule on the day after Thanksgiving. However, even with scaled back service, we found that our trains were largely empty. With finite funding available to us, we must concentrate our operations and funding on the times when we will have the greatest numbers of riders. As a result, we are unable to provide service on the day after Thanksgiving.

---

**Debbie from Broad Run, VA** asks:

Passengers never seem to listen to conductors when they say not to stand up for the next station until we pull away from the one we are at. Since the children are not willing to follow directions could you please start telling them that the train will not pull away from a station until everyone is seated first? If they are going to act like kids then treat them that way.

**VRE Management:**

Passenger queuing is a hot topic that pops up intermittently on our trains. Our conductors are trained to handle these situations in several ways, starting with making announcements and, if that does not work, by taking other action to make sure that customers remain seated until the train departs the previous stop. Send us an email if there is a particular train we need to focus on.

---

**Don from Fredericksburg** asks:

I have been riding Fredericksburg train 300 for almost two years. The usual time for 300 to arrive at the Fredericksburg station is within a minute of scheduled departure or later. Lately I have been taking train 302. That train arrives at the Fredericksburg station approximately 15 minutes before departure time. If 302 can be at the station 15 minutes before departure, why not 300? 302 has a better ontime arrival in Washington - is this coincidence or not?

**VRE Management:**

The trains are required to arrive at Fredericksburg with sufficient time to board everyone and depart on time. However, while some do, they are not required to arrive 15 minutes early. That said, I will see what can be done to ensure that train 300 arrives in sufficient time for its 5:15 departure.

---

**Dennis from Fredericksburg, VA** asks:

First I want to premise this with I'm very please with VRE. I've been faithfully riding for three years now from Fredericksburg to Crystal City. My question is: Can you change the policy of the Quiet Car to "No electronic devices" vise the current policy of "Refrain from cell phone use; Keep pagers, cell phones, laptop and PDA sounds off; Speak only in whispers". I think if you took a survey and asked the question of "Would you prefer to change the current policy mentioned above to no electronic devices period" that you would have an overwhelming majority agree.

**VRE Management:**

It's been several years since we've taken a look at our Quiet Car policies. I'll be happy to look at them in more detail to see if any changes need to be made.

---

**James from Colonial Beach, OK** asks:

Will you "new" Gallery Cars ride any better than the old one?

**VRE Management:**

Our new cars are similar to our current Gallery cars in layout. However, just as there are differences between an automobile made in 1950 and today's cars, these will be significantly differently. In fact, you will be able to see the new cars for yourself before they go into service! I intend to have one of our new cars on display at Union Station on December 6. More details to follow.

---

**John from Fredericksburg VA** asks:

What are VRE's requirements for turning on the heat in the cars? I have called and sent e-mails asking this question and as of this morning there was still no heat in the car to speak of. I was told the heat is on for the floor but the overhead is still on AC not heat. I don't believe that at degrees under 50 we need AC. If VRE does not want to turn up the heat, at least pass out blankets! VRE has raised their rates, and changed their schedule, I have not seen any improvements for the rate change and the trains are still arriving late. VRE is at the best barely meeting my expectations.

**VRE Management:**

Our cars are normally programmed to automatically turn on heat when the temperature drops below 68 degrees. It is possible that the thermometer in your car is not properly calibrated. We identified one of these cars last week on train 302, and reset the unit to work properly. If you have not included the car number in your reports to us, please do so as they help with our efforts.

---

**Martin from Fredericksburg, VA** asks:

Again this morning, the ticket machines were not working. What's the official policy for riders when you have no ticket and cannot secure one? Also, is there not someway to create a "backup" system in case the mainline system fails? Thanks

**VRE Management:**

If you are in a situation where all ticket machines are malfunctioning and you cannot purchase or validate your ticket, you should talk to the conductor of your train prior to boarding. The conductor has the discretion to allow you to board.

---

**Ken from Woodbridge VA** asks:

LAST winter I submitted the suggestion for wind shields (like hte ones at Woodbridge) for the L'Enfant Plaza Station, as it has become a serious COLD wind tunnel with the construction of the new building. I was told it was "A really good idea" and that it would be looked at. It is now THIS winter, and no windshields..... why?...

**VRE Management:**

I remember your question from last year, and my response. It is a good idea, but I have not found the money to do it. Stay tuned, I am still looking for funding.

---

**Jeff from Broadrun** asks:

Dale, the last chat had you remark that the Gallery Cars were a great deal at a dollar each. Isn't the rest of the story that VRE spent about \$240,000 each to deliver and renovate these cars. Cheaper than new? Hell yes! I've never seen their weight/seat compared to the Sounders. Since NS and CSX typically charge by the ton-mile, heavy cars cost more to operate. What's that story? The Gallery Cars sure look like a lot of heavy iron to my poor eyes, and I wonder about the operation expense.

**VRE Management:**

Yes, the old Gallery cars are cheaper than new. A new car costs about \$2 million. If we had not purchased them, we could not be carrying the number of people we are carrying today. That's the real story.

We pay by the train-mile in our agreements with CSX and NS, thus a four-car train costs as much to move as an eight-car train, regardless of weight.

As an aside, the Kawasakis are the heaviest cars in our fleet. The Gallery cars are substantially lighter.

---

**Davin from Woodbridge, VA** asks:

When the new Quantico Brige and 3rd track are finished next year, will on-time performance improve significantly? I understand that only VRE and Amtrak can use this track, right?

**VRE Management:**

On-time performance through this area will improve. The new bridge will be used by CSX as well as Amtrak and VRE trains.

---

**Danielle from Stafford, VA** asks:

I was on the 309 a few weeks ago and it was delayed 15 minute out of union station (this could have been put on rail time but it wasn't) and then 15 minutes at L'Efant. No announcement was made either time as to the problem. Then we rode home in darkness. If such a situation arises, can the conductors please let us know as riders what is going on. We have families waiting for us at home and half an hour delay can cause big problems (plus riding home in darkness is no fun).

**VRE Management:**

The delay to train 309 on October 24 was due in large part to a mechanical problem on the generator in the locomotive which controls the doors, lights and the PA system, which only began to occur as the train was preparing for departure. As a result, announcements were hard to make. While conductors normally walk through the trains to make verbal announcements when the PA system does not work, they may not have been heard easily in all parts of the train.

---

**Todd from Bristow, VA** asks:

Is VRE considering a new system to replace the unreliable TVMs we currently use? It seems those machines are broken more than they're working.

**VRE Management:**

While we have no plans to replace the fare collection system at this time, we are decreasing the number of errors customers encounter when purchasing or validating tickets. We've been working with the manufacturer of the machines to rebuild the units within the TVMs which have been most prone to errors, are adding weatherproof seals to our touch screens, and are replacing credit card readers. We also plan to upgrade the current system as soon as funds permit.

---

**James from Falmouth** asks:

This is going to sound like one of those Cox commercials "Still waiting...", any news on the Jan 5th derailment?

**VRE Management:**

We're waiting too. I know all comments have been made by all parties, and the report is going through the normal approval process prior to publication. In most investigations, this process can take at least a year. We were hoping that in our case, it would be quicker.

---

**Andrew** from **Burke Centre, VA** asks:

Can you please place some bicycle racks close to the platform during the construction?

**VRE Management:**

I can talk to Fairfax County and see if this is a possibility.

---

**BrianS** from **Stafford, Va** asks:

When are you going to wash the train windows?? ... it would be nice to see the changing seasons

**VRE Management:**

We realize that the windows on several of our trains are do not appear as clean or transparent as they should be. The windows were opaqued a couple years ago when they were washed improperly with the wrong solution. I'm looking into getting them replaced with new glass as funding allows, but there is no immediate fix.

---

**Larry** from **Clifton, VA** asks:

With the parking garage construction at the Burke Center stop, will VRE be more proactive in ensuring that there is power to the ticket machines and lights in the parking lot. The worst lighting seems to be near the handicapped spaces anyway.

**VRE Management:**

The power outage which occurred earlier this week was the result of an accident not planned as part of the garage construction. That said, every effort was made to provide alternate power and have power restored quickly. While we cannot make guarantees when it comes to the causes of blackouts (weather, etc.), we can say that we do not plan on having more such power outages.

---

**Chris** from **Bristow, VA** asks:

Do you think having a Democrat controlled House and possibly a Democrat controlled Senate help in gaining more funds geared towards public transportation?

**VRE Management:**

I really don't know, we'll have to wait and see.

---

**Dave** from **Woodbridge, VA** asks:

It's been 11 months since Train #304 derailed. Any news on what was the cause of the derailment and the status of the severely damaged railcars?

**VRE Management:**

While I answered another question about the report, I did want to tell you that I expect the remaining cars to return to service within the next few weeks.

---

**Pat** from **Broad Run** asks:

Recognizing there are times that the consist needs to be changed to accommodate the travel times to coincide with events, example, Halloween and voting. Is it possible to plan the consist exchange ahead so those persons who do plan ahead can make other arrangements or take a later train to keep out of the crush.

**VRE Management:**

While we normally announce consist changes through Train Talk, and have for the changes this week, a good rule of thumb is that we'll be running our larger consists on the first outbound trains of our evening service (not mid-day) on days like Halloween and Election Day when everyone is trying to get home early, as well as the days

before major holidays.

---

**Dan from Bristow, VA** asks:

We've heard a lot from VRE about the garage at Burke Centre, and understandably so; it's nice to see that project finally underway. However, we haven't heard anything from you about the garage in Manassas, even though it is being partly paid for directly by VRE. What can you tell us about it? Also, the Washington Post article about it last week said that VRE's share would be paid for using Federal funds. Does this mean that a Manassas city permit would not be required to use the garage, as is currently the case with the other Manassas lots?

**VRE Management:**

The design for the garage at Manassas is 60% complete and the land has been purchased. We need to complete the design and then move towards construction. While we do not have a lot of details at this time, when we have information we will let you know through our usual communications.

---

**Jodie from Burke, VA** asks:

I was wondering the proper etiquette for offering a seat when the train is crowded. I had a seat one day in the "Disabled or Elderly Passengers" area, and there was an older woman that boarded. I couldn't tell how old she was, but I didn't want to offend her by implying that she was elderly, by offering a seat. At the same time, I thought it was also equally bad to not offer a seat. What's the best thing to do in this situation? Many women might be sensitive to being thought of as "elderly".

**VRE Management:**

My advice to you would be to simply offer the seat with no explanation. If she turns the seat down simply offer it to the next person. At the end of the day you'll know that you've done the right thing.

---

**George from Burke, VA** asks:

I understand removing cars for maintenance. However, if you remove a car for maintenance, why cant you replace it with another car?? We heard this morning that we would have four cars for two weeks. Its not nice to short a train 100 seats for two weeks.

**VRE Management:**

There were two Sounder cars removed for maintenance. Unfortunately, we do not have any spares and they don't play well with others. We cannot easily "mix and match" them with other cars. My understanding is that the trainset should return to normal next week. If it's longer, we will let you know.

---

**Dan from Quantico** asks:

Has VRE provided train evacuation procedures to local fire departments for the likely event someone has to be medically evacuated from the upper deck of the Chicago surplus trains? When asked, the conductors said they don't have any procedures and don't think anyone will get a litter down that stairwell. When it happens, VRE can expect some damage as the EMTs cut the rails overhead to let the stretcher down – and that's avoidable if someone bothers now. I don't want to think what repairing the car afterwards is going to cost everyone! How about a drill? I'll gladly be the victim.

**VRE Management:**

We are required by the Federal Railroad Administration to hold emergency drills with local agencies every year. Keep an eye out in Train Talk as we ask for volunteer "victims" every year.

---

**Joe from Spotsylvania** asks:

a neighbor of mine happens to be my County Rep. I asked him the status of Sposty joining the VRE system. His answer was that is was going to be a while before the county joins. He said that the stumbling block is CSX and not VRE. Apparently, CSX is demanding (his words, not mine) more than what the county can or wants to do. Do you have any update as to the status of Spotsy joining VRE? Thanks!! PS: The service has improved greatly!!!

**VRE Management:**

The station wioll not be built in Spotsylvania without the approval of Spotsylvania. CSX is not holding up the

process. Spotsylvania must make a decision that they want to join, then we'll work to make it happen.

P.S. - We'll keep on working to keep you on time.

---

**Jeff from Spotsylvania** asks:

I'm a former Fredericksburg resident who recently moved to Spotsylvania and now cannot park in the city lot in town. Fine, but now there's plans to remove spaces without replacing them. I understand VRE doesn't own the lots, but surely there's a better answer than nothing can be done. This is a key issue, considering a Spotsylvania station isn't on the horizon. That aside, service and on-time has improved lately.

**VRE Management:**

I know I've talked about this situation many times. Fredericksburg station will lose parking spaces as leased lots are developed by their owners, and we lose the parking spaces on them. I cannot make it any clearer that the city of Fredericksburg will not permit us to provide any additional parking. The only two solutions are use of the Fredericksburg structure lot at \$4 per day, and/or construction of the station in Spotsylvania to relieve the parking situation in Fredericksburg.

---

**Tony from Spotsylvania VA** asks:

How about a quarterly ticket with a break when the MetroCheks come out? You get funds up front and we get some savings. Possibility of a multiple-ride Amtrak Step Up ticket the conductor can punch? I hate getting 15 tickets at a pop - wear and tear on machines, people waiting as chunka-chunka on the printer, too many to fit in the ticket holder. This is probably the 4th or 5th time I've put this in with no response.

**VRE Management:**

Thanks for the suggestion in adding new ticket types. The current cost in modifying our fare collection system to add these additional tickets would be prohibitively expensive. This being said, when we are able to integrate our system with SmarTrip, a lot of the difficulties in purchasing multiple tickets will disappear.

---

**Rich from Stafford** asks:

What has happened to the train talk messages. I used to get messages about trains running late, consists changes, and the like. Now it is a rare to receive any notifications regarding service.

**VRE Management:**

Thankfully, we have not needed to post many service delays recently. However, we have been sending weekly updates on other service-related issues. If you are not getting them, please contact us at [gotrains@vre.org](mailto:gotrains@vre.org) and we will be happy to check your account.

---

**John from Burke, VA** asks:

Now that we have started parking off-site at Burke, what are the arrangements for those few times when the train breaks and cannot come, or cannot come within reasonable time limits? How do we get to our cars at the off-site lots? and what will be the response time to pick us up to take us to the lots? Thank you.

**VRE Management:**

Should there be a difficulty, we will coordinate with the EZ bus and shuttle service. We have already discussed these possibilities with them.

---

**PG from Broad Run** asks:

I can't resist. Those in the Broad Run Runners Club look like they need to run. If they only saw themselves. Seriously though, someone is going to be dangerously hurt. I can see a lawsuit coming and not to the VRE. If it is so urgent then find a new job locally where you can get home at a decent time. The fractious language directed at the Conductors is appalling. I applaud these people for dealing with you runners.

**VRE Management:**

For all you runners out there, we know you have your reasons. Please be sure to be safe and courteous as you rush to your cars. We would hate to see someone get hurt over the matter of a few minutes.

---

**Eric** from **Manassas Park VA** asks:

For Debbie From Broad Run. If the trains do not run until everyone is seated...some trains will not run. I'm glad she hasn't walked the length of a train only to find no empty seats, but many of us have. Thanks for putting up with us children, Dale.

**VRE Management:**

Here's another perspective on the issue of queuing. We see this a lot. There are always at least two sides to any story.

---

**Ben** from **Manassas** asks:

An Idea for more revenue....a bar car. Put a bar car on one of the evening trains. Choose one that has less ridership to even seating out. Plus our bar tabs would be additional money for VRE.

**VRE Management:**

An "outside of the box" thinker! There's no question it would make money. I have talked to other railroads which have bar cars and it's a money-maker. I'm just not sure we can make it work.

---

**VRE Management:**

As always, the hour flew by. It's nice to see what other issues are out there when service is running much better. As I said, everyone here and at CSX is committed to keeping this trend. I look forward to hearing from you again after Thanksgiving. I'll meet you back here on December 13. When we meet again, let me know how you like the new car which will be on display at Union Station December 6. I'll be interested in your comments!

--Dale

---

Copyright © 2005 // Virginia Railway Express