

Virginia Railway Express

Let's Talk!

The next VRE online forum will start on Wednesday, October 4th at 12 noon.



There are currently 76 questions waiting to be answered.

VRE Management:

Welcome back to our monthly on-line forum. We've been busy with the special transportation session last week, hoping to gain some additional funding for VRE railcars and locomotives.

Unfortunately, nothing came from the session. I'll be working the next legislative session in January to gain funding for locomotives that we desperately need.

Now for questions.

Robert from Haymarket, VA asks:

Will the Broad Run station be dissolved after the Gainesville/Haymarket stations are built? What if the US Government cuts its funding to Amtrak, what will happen to the VRE ?

VRE Management:

The Broad Run station will remain active after we expand our service to the Gainesville/Haymarket area. Once the expansion is complete, we will modify service so that different trains will serve each area.

VRE is not the only commuter operation that Amtrak contracts crew and mechanical services with. In fact, there is a whole Amtrak division devoted to providing these services to operations throughout the country. Should Amtrak funding be reduced and the commuter services division be affected, there are other service providers VRE could negotiate with to step in.

Steve from Broad Run asks:

Why is it that it takes an act of God for the ticket machines to recognize credit cards that any other point of sale machine will immediately recognize? On average I will try three credit cards before one will finally be accepted by your machines. Very frustrating when there is a train to catch and people in line behind me.

VRE Management:

We are aware of the difficulty some of our riders experience with the credit card readers at some stations. Unfortunately, the card readers are wearing out more quickly than we expected. Consequently, we have begun the process of replacing all the card readers in TVMs throughout the system. We hope you will notice an improvement shortly.

Sarge from Manassas, Va. asks:

I am concerned about any wildlife that might venture onto the train tracks when a train is approaching. What is being done to make sure that no poor innocent animal is struck and killed by an approaching VRE train?

VRE Management:

As you may know, the tracks on which our trains operate are owned by two freight railroads --- Norfolk Southern on the Manassas line and CSX on the Fredericksburg line. Unfortunately, we are not in a position to prevent wildlife from venturing onto the tracks in areas where they are not fenced off.

Joseph from Stafford asks:

What are the possibilities of getting the Quantico Bridge completed before Spring 2007? It sure does not look like regular construction is taking place on a daily basis. VRE is overseeing this project and not anyone else.

VRE Management:

We, too, are looking forward to the completion on the Quantico Bridge. Since the project also includes new signals and switches in that area, we do not expect it to be completed any earlier than next Spring.

Janet from Manassas Park, VA asks:

In the past when there has been an FRC exchange, it was done at all nightly departing stations. This time it's only at L'Enfant and Crystal City. Any reason why your the exchange isn't being done at Union Station and Alexandria?

VRE Management:

I'm sorry that we weren't able to visit every station for the latest FRC exchange. We decided to visit the two most populated inner city stations (Crystal City and L'Enfant) to exchange as many FRCs as possible in an efficient way. While there are several other methods (see <http://www.vre.org/programs/2006-frc-exchange.html> on our website), we will look at whether more station visits are needed.

John from Burke, Virginia asks:

While going down the stairwell of a Gallery Car I encountered a young man blocking my egress on the steps. I asked that he move and he told me 'when the train stops.' I told him I needed to get by and he said the same. Finally I had to push and guide him gently down the steps to get down. Will VRE please tell these idiots to quit blocking stairwells? Can VRE fine them? Can I?

VRE Management:

While blocking the stairs is not very considerate, it is not punishable by a fine. However, we can remind riders to keep the stairs (and aisles) clear through on board announcements and reminders in VRE Update. I'll see what we can do to have periodic reminders issued on the trains, Train Talk, and VRE Update.

Marie from Manassas Pk, VA asks:

Are there any plans to fix the main concrete steps to the platform at Manassas Park? The metal anti-slip treads are crumbling off.

VRE Management:

I'll look into the situation.

Ardy from Burke Centre asks:

Good afternoon: When will the Burke Centre Station join VRE's Amtrak "step up" stations? Prior to the last two fare increases, I requested that the VRE either have the am&pm Amtrak "step-up" trains stop at Burke Centre, one of your busiest stations, so that our fares are not always subsidizing the "step-up" customers; OR, that the VRE start charging the Amtrak "step-up" customers their full freight-their market rate fares. Since, without fail, the VRE's deficit is equivalent to the Amtrak "step-up subsidy" of which stations other than BC get to take advantage. Thank you.

VRE Management:

Amtrak makes the decisions on where their trains will stop. With their trains being largely long-distance in nature, it is difficult for us to ask them to place additional stops along the route. Certainly, while we know that an express from Burke Centre to Downtown is desired, we don't think that this is the answer.

Another important consideration is that Amtrak train 20 normally comes at the end of our rush hour, so we don't think it would be very useful for most of our riders.

Rhett from West Point, Virginia asks:

Continuing aerial photos of the new Quantico Bridge frequently appear on "Trainorders.com" - it is apparent the structure is [about] READY for ballast and track to be installed. What is the current timetable for the "cut-in" of the additional, second track over Quantico Creek [of an eventual total of three, which includes the present, single-track bridge]; how soon can we expect it to be IN SERVICE? (We already know it can't come soon enough!)

VRE Management:

Bridge will be complete by the end of October. Then, ballast and rail will be placed on the bridge. Currently, cut-in for the track across the new bridge will take place in the first part of February, 2007. We are currently working on the details of the transition plan.

Matt from Manassas, VA asks:

On the daily download, what does it mean when you say the engineer is getting additional instructions from the dispatcher and can the engineer not run the train when receiving instructions?

VRE Management:

When track conditions change after the crew has received their initial orders, the dispatcher must relay the new information to them. The procedure is that the train stops, the dispatcher reads the order to the engineer who must write it down. When that is completed, he must read the order back to the dispatcher word-for-word. Just like when you drive a car, this is not something that should be done while the train is in operation. This does not happen very often.

Carl from Arlington, VA asks:

Do you anticipate that the Fredericksburg rail improvements (Quantico Bridge, third main, ect.) scheduled to come online over the next twelve months or so will enable you to increase train speeds or capacity? Or just improve on-time performance?

VRE Management:

Wow. We've got a lot of questions on the Quantico Bridge today! At this time, we think the main improvement that will come from the Quantico Bridge will be better on-time performance. Our analysis indicates about 20% of the delays on the Fredericksburg line are somehow related to the one-track bridge at Quantico.

Tim from Fairfax, VA asks:

When VRE first began service in 1992, why didn't VRE buy new locomotives instead of 40 year old locomotives?

VRE Management:

As a start-up operation, VRE was limited in funds. Since refurbished locomotives are significantly less expensive and last almost as long as new ones, the decision was made to purchase as many locomotives as possible with the money available at the time.

Rob from Haymarket asks:

Are there any plans to expand the parking at Broad Run? How about re-striping to fit more vehicles?

VRE Management:

Currently, there are no other plans for expansion of the Broad Run/Airport lot. We have restriped the lot in the past. We will continue to keep an eye on it, but there are not a lot of options for this lot.

Hammer from Fredericksburg asks:

When will the "vender" section be removed from the Leeland St. lot and replaced with spaces, and does the county still patrol the lot for people parking illegally? Even with the overflow lot, there are still those who willing

choose to park illegally [cross-hatched areas and fire lane etc..].

VRE Management:

As our facilities crews do visit the station in the middle of the day, we still need these spaces so that they can quickly access the station for their daily work. The local police are continuing to patrol the lot and ticket those illegally parked.

Mark from Manassas, VA asks:

What is the status of the CSX track work on the Fredericksburg Line, which is constantly slowing trains between Franconia/Springfield and Alexandria.

VRE Management:

We know there are some slow orders along one of the tracks between Alexandria and Franconia/Springfield. Unfortunately, we do not know exactly how long these slow orders will last, but we do know that CSX has been dispatching our trains on the other track between those two stations when possible to avoid the slow orders.

Jim from Spotsylvania, VA asks:

Any news on the new station that has been planned for Massaponax. It was to occur if and when the County approved the funding. That was done over a year ago and yet no word as to when the building will begin.

VRE Management:

I have been talking with representatives from Spotsylvania on the potential for a station in Spotsylvania. However, for planning to proceed, the Board of Supervisors must approve joining VRE. That has not occurred, and I do not know if and when it will occur.

Lee from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

My Pet Peeve is riders who want to clack away on their laptops for an hour or more in the Quiet Car. They have 4-7 other cars they can use without disturbing my peace and sleep. Its not fair that you won't let people use cell phones, etc. on the Quiet Car (and I agree with that), but you provide special treatment to a handful of selfish individuals so they can turn the Quiet Car into their private Business Car. Quiet means "free of noise" or does VRE have a different definition of this term?

VRE Management:

People who use the Quiet Car use it for different reasons. While some sleep, others prefer to use the time to work. And while to some, quiet may mean free of noise, our Quiet Car rules do allow whispering and other soft noises to occur.

David from Baltimore, MD asks:

While I live outside of the VRE Service area, I find that the VRE Services greatly exceed those of my current carrier "up north". I am enthralled with the idea of FRC's and on-time messages from the VRE staff. With my current system, I get alerts 1/2 hour to days late. While I understand that there are always going to be problems with any service, I would just like to point out that the you, at VRE, seem to go out of your way to at least give some concern as to the welfare of your customers. Kudos to a great job - I only wish your northern counterpart would care even half as much as VRE.

VRE Management:

Thank you for the compliment.

Tina from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

This is about last week's ordeal with train # 307, being picked up by train 309. We were told busses would be waiting for us at the FB train station. Since this was not the case and I finally took a taxi back to Leeland, how can I (and many others in the same situation) get reimbursed for the cab ride? Thank you.

VRE Management:

We know that some were told that buses would be waiting when in fact they were only on their way. While we had lined up taxis, we know it can take up two hours for buses to respond to any incident. We are glad that you were

able to get a ride home, please send us a copy of the receipt and we'll be happy to reimburse you.

Todd from Stafford asks:

A recent issue of train talk mentioned schedule changes that were forthcoming -- can you offer any details?

VRE Management:

We are reviewing minor schedule changes for both the Manassas and Fredericksburg lines. We have not received approval from CSX on the recommended changes. I anticipate receiving approval by the end of the week. As soon as they are final, we will let you know what they are. The schedule changes will go into effect October 30.

Bob from F'burg asks:

It seems that every time someone asks about VRE using "Smartrip" your response is "18 months." Well... "18 months" from when? If you go by the first time you said it, we should be closer to 10 months now.

VRE Management:

We, too, are tired of telling our riders that the integration of SmarTrip into VRE's fare collection system is still 18 months away. However, we have had to wait for all of the transit agencies in the area to reach agreement on how a regional SmarTrip system should operate. Unfortunately, this has taken longer than anyone expected.

The good news is that the specifications for the regional system are almost complete and we are working on how to modifying our existing fare collection equipment to integrate with the regional system. The bad news is that VRE's integration of SmarTrip is probably about 18 months away.

Davin from Woodbridge, VA asks:

I read in the September OPS minutes that you will finally build a second platform at the Woodbridge station. An article in the Potomac News a few years ago mentioned that a new Kiss & Ride lot would also be built. Can you give us any details on this?

VRE Management:

Our Director of Construction may know better, but I believe that we are the design for a second platform and a pedestrian overpass at the Woodbridge Station. The second platform will be served by a Kiss and Ride lot on US Route 1. As soon as the design is approved, we will construct the second platform and pedestrian overpass. The Kiss and Ride lot is tied closely to the construction of an interchange at US Route 1 and Route 123.

Doug from Lake Ridge VA asks:

Will Conductors be able to swap FRCs? I only have one of them to swap and dont wanna have to mail it.

VRE Management:

We have given our crews new FRCs for delays. Because they have many other duties, we are not requiring them to exchange FRCs at this time.

Sandy from Stafford asks:

I know that it seems that VRE gets a lot of complaints and not so many praises. I just wanted to tell you that I appreciate all that VRE does to keep my commute as easy as possible. Lord knows, even when we are an hour late, it's still better than sitting in that parking lot called I-95. Thank you!

VRE Management:

Thank you. After the mess on I-95 this morning, it's good to see that we were mostly on-time.

Ray from Fredericksburg asks:

OK. This is the 6th time I've posted this question... I've heard that VRE and the taxpayers are footing the bill for the new bridge at Quantico and repairs at the Fredericksburg bridge yet CSX will assume control when work is complete. Isn't that like saying you buy my car, you maintain my car, and you fill it with gas... but I drive it? Where can I sign up for this deal?

VRE Management:

The improvement to railroad crossing the Quantico Creek was one of the original contract agreements VRE had with CSX when we began operating on their rails. We have been fortunate enough to receive assistance from the state and federal government to complete this project. As you know, we expect that the completion of the project will significantly increase our on-time performance on the Fredericksburg line.

eric from **Quantico** asks:

Are there any plans in the near future (12 months) to upgrade passenger cars. Some of the older cars are very uncomfortable and noisy.

VRE Management:

61 new cars have been ordered. The first will begin to arrive at the end of the year.

Ken from **Stafford** asks:

"My Pet Peeve is riders who want to clack away on their laptops for an hour or more in the Quiet Car." Quiet car does not mean silent car. If you want silent, my recommendation is those small foam ear plugs or Bose noise canceling headphones. Both work great!

VRE Management:

A good recommendation that shows there is always two sides to every story, even in the Quiet Car.

Sean from **Bristow** asks:

Any plans for Wi-Fi service on the VRE trains, such as that being tested in California?

VRE Management:

We will consider Wi-Fi when we know we have continuous, uninterrupted connectivity on both rail lines. Today, we do not.

Late again from **Leeland** asks:

What is the standard for on time? The download for Oct. 2 doesn't show train 302 being late into Alexandria.

VRE Management:

Trains are considered delayed when they arrive at their final destination more than five minutes late. We know that sometimes trains can be late at intermediate points and still arrive "On-Time." Part of what we are looking at with the new schedules is adjusting intermediate times to make them more realistic with what our riders experience.

L from **Man, VA** asks:

What does it mean when you have "longer than usual passenger dwell times" as a cause for delays (on time service)?

VRE Management:

Another hot topic for today, our new Daily Download feature! We're glad to see that you are keeping up-to-date with us.

Passenger dwell time is the time a train spends in the station boarding or discharging passengers. Sometimes when large crowds or customers requiring assistance (such as customers in wheelchairs) are boarding or detraining, the train may spend more time in the station than it normally would.

Dirk from Clifton, VA asks:

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

VRE Management:

We expect to have two of the new cab cars in service by this January. With more coming online in the next few months.

The additional 50 railcars will be delivered starting in December 2007 and we should receive them at the the rate of approximately 4 per month.

Paul from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

Any thoughts about adding a "Cafe" car similar to the AMTRAK Cafe cars that provide limited refreshments (food & drink) service ? Any thoughts to adding vending machines at the VRE stations that do not have a co-located convenience store ?

VRE Management:

Believe it or not, we once had cafe cars. As ridership grew, it became more difficult to defend having a car that sat 40 people when people were standing. At this time, we do not anticipate reinstating them.

Eddie from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

On Sept 21, there was an article in the Free Lance Star concerning Rep Jo Anne Davis having a meeting with VRE, CSX, and Amtrak to come up with ideas as to what is needed to improve performance. Do you feel this meeting accomplished anything, and what are some of the next steps you are taking to work with Amtrak and CSX? I think VRE is a great service and I want to see the system expand and improve.

VRE Management:

I was at the meeting, and she made it very clear to CSX, Amtrak and VRE that she wanted service on the Fredericksburg line improved. The Federal Railroad Administrator was also at the meeting and indicated that he would oversee improvements on the line and that he would keep the congresswoman updated. I found the meeting to be beneficial, and her desire to have everyone work together to make improvements on the Fredericksburg line is commendable.

Nikki from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

Are they going to add more parking spaces at the Fredericksburg station.

VRE Management:

No. Unfortunately, the numbers may decrease when owners of leased lots decide not to renew their leases with us.

miguel from fredericksburg asks:

what is the status of getting more operating toilets on the trains?

VRE Management:

Two-thirds of the 61 new bi-level railcars we have on order will have toilets.

MJ Fiocco from Manassas VA asks:

When will you put a trash can and a ticket validator at the north end of the Manassas Park station? The trash can was promised almost four months ago.

VRE Management:

I'll check to see what has taken so long to have a trash can placed there. The ticket validators are a problem, but I'm working on it.

Marianne from Burke, VA asks:

During last Thursday's rain, one aisle of the parking lot at Rolling Road was under 4-6 inches of water. Looks like the drain is plugged. Could VRE get someone to clean it out before the next heavy rain?

VRE Management:

We'll let Fairfax County know.

Dan from Broad Run asks:

When the new cars come in - will the old cattle cars be removed? I visited the Historic Walkersville RR in Maryland for their "Jesse James" trip, and was surprised to see the same seats on the "antique" cars as we have on the cattle cars. Although the "antique" was more comfortable - more padding.

VRE Management:

The 61 new cars will replace most of the current Gallery cars in our fleet. However, we will retain "the pick of the litter." I still maintain that buying 45 double-decker railcars for \$45 was the best railroad deal of the century.

P.S. We weren't the only ones who took advantage of this deal.

VRE Management:

My, how time flew! There were a lot of good questions, as usual. We tried to pick the ones with the most relevance. If you still have questions, I look forward to hearing them next time. In the meantime, I continue to work with CSX on a daily basis to improve the performance of the Fredericksburg line. They are making a number of changes which should continue to improve the on-time performance.

See you in a month!

--Dale

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