

Virginia Railway Express

Let's Talk!

The next VRE online forum will start on Wednesday, September 6th at 12 noon.



There are currently 85 questions waiting to be answered.

VRE Management:

Welcome back from a long hot summer! Which was one of the most difficult that VRE has had. I know that many of you suffered some long delays especially in the months of June and July. Due to a number of problems including flooding, heat, tie work, equipment problems and signal and switch problems. I just got back from trips to Norfolk and Jacksonville which are the headquarters of our two host railroads and had meeting with executives that controlled train operations on both railroads.

VRE Management:

We discussed on-time performance and equipment failures. Both railroads have assured me that they are absolutely committed to increasing the on-time performance of VRE trains. In fact you will have noticed that on-time performance has improved on both railroads during the month of August. I've asked both railroads to concentrate on morning trains and to eliminate all on-time problems of possible. We have done that because I know that with "Meet the Management and go-trains that your top priority is getting to work on time.

VRE Management:

Okay now on to the questions!

Sharon from Spotsylvania, VA asks:

With an overwhelming amount of riders at the Fredericksburg station, parking spots are limited. I have noticed that several van pools pick up riders in the far lot, taking away spots from VRE riders. This does not seem fair. Is there any way this can be stopped?

VRE Management:

Most VRE parking lots were set up to be "commuter" lots. All commuters are able to park there, regardless of their method of commuting. We'll continue to keep our eye on it.

Greg from Springfield, VA asks:

Could you periodically remind conductors to turn off the fans while trains are traveling under Union Station? They seem to be forgetting to do so quite often lately. Thanks.

VRE Management:

I can do that. We are planning some training in the next few months.

James from Falmouth asks:

What's taking so long with a statement about the outcome of the Jan 5th derailment?

VRE Management:

The NTSB has not released it yet. We had expected it over the summer, but I also know that it can take almost a year for a report to be finalized. I'll let everyone know when the report is released.

Debbie from Broad Run, VA asks:

There was once talk about opening stations in the Gainesville and Haymarket area. I can't find anything else on the website about this topic. Can you tell me when you plan on opening these stations? I'm tired of driving 30-45 min. just to get to the train. These would be two very welcomed stations.

VRE Management:

We are definitely interested in expanding to these stations! However, our ability to expand is contingent upon funding. The plan for expansion can be found in our strategic plan, which is on our website at http://www.vre.org/about/Ops_board_items/2005_opns_bd_items/September_Ops_Bd_Items_2005/Action_Item_8-D_G-H_Implementation_Plan.pdf.

Very Disappointed from Burke Centre, VA asks:

I see you've lived up to every promise you've made in the past to provide information about the Burke Centre parking lot construction. NOT! You guys are really lame. You've promised OVER AND OVER to provide more info. In June, you said "Look for more information on the plans in August." Big shocker, but there's no information! On the constructive side, instead of paying for a bus to shuttle people from a satellite lot that will add at least 5 minutes each way to our commutes, how about renting parking lot space from Target and the pool across the road from Target? Also, EZBus on Zion Dr?

VRE Management:

Fairfax County is heading up this project. They are in the process of selecting the contractor to build the garage. Members of the County's staff were available for all trains during Meet the Management at Burke yesterday with schematics and a handout. The hand out is on our website at <http://www.vre.org/service/project-update-9-06.pdf>.

Mary from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

The 5:16 VRE Train to Fredericksburg, VA has fumes coming into the cars, daily. They are getting worse instead of improving. People on the train are covering their faces trying to avoid the fumes. How long will this problem continue? I only smell the fumes on the p.m. train. thanks for your assistance.

VRE Management:

Our Director of Rail Equipment and Services is actively looking into this problem on train 307. We initially believed it to be a locomotive-related issue, and inspected and fixed the component on the locomotive we believed was causing the problem. Since this turned out to not be the case, we are investigating the matter further.

Ted from Manassas asks:

Are we going to celebrate the first annual "Oak Leaf Oil Festival" this year? If not, what have you done to prevent this from happening this year?

VRE Management:

Many times in the fall, particularly after a heavy storm, leaves will cover the top of the rails. When this occurs, the weight of the locomotive will crush the leaves expressing the oil between the steel wheel and the steel rail acting as a lubricant. When this occurs the locomotive loses traction. We know that some of our locomotives are better equipped to operate over fallen leaves. We will take a look at our fleet as the time nears to ensure that this does not occur again.

Jim from Manassas asks:

Now that the cool new passenger cars are on order, will you be looking at the reliability of the locomotives, either through upgrades or acquisitions?

VRE Management:

My number one project right now is gaining funding for locomotives. Specifically we are discussing our situation with State and Federal legislatures for assistance in obtaining funding. I'll let you know how it goes.

Ken from Stafford asks:

What's happening with window replacement on the Kawasaki cars? I assume these cars will be in service for many more years to come? I'd hate to think for the next 10 years or more they will be in the current state or worse.

VRE Management:

This is a pet project of mine. I am going to replace these windows with glass as soon as I can find approximately 300K. Stay tuned.

melissa from Manassas, VA asks:

My question: I'm curious to know why the Sounder trains smell so bad sometimes in the afternoon. Is it the trash? or the bathrooms? I ask because sometimes the smell is overwhelming. I've heard other passengers comment about it as well. Thank you, Md

VRE Management:

I'm sure you notice this more on hot afternoons. Because the Sounders have toilets that must be pumped, the afternoon sun can cause quite an odor. We are working with our contractor to remedy this problem.

Linda from Woodbridge, VA asks:

Can the Fredricksburg Line schedule begin earlier in the AM?

VRE Management:

I'm personally working to add an earlier train on the Fredericksburg line in the morning. I should have an answer from CSX on the possibility by the end of September.

Billy from Stafford, VA asks:

How many tracks will the new Quantico Bridge support?

VRE Management:

The new bridge will support two tracks. But only one track will be initially installed.

Lisa from Manassas, VA asks:

I wanted to pass along my appreciation for the focus on VRE's on-time-performance. You've become so much better that I've missed my train...twice. That was no fault of yours, I have just been so accustomed to a late train that I procrastinated and reduced my walking speed to a stroll. I'll have to pick up the pace again.

VRE Management:

I'm glad you've noticed the difference. Senior level executives and Norfolk Southern are briefed everyday on VRE's on-time performance. We mentioned in the beginning that railroads are paying close attention to our performance.

AJ from Alexandria asks:

Would love to see more of the train cars equipped with cup holders as well as the broken ones fixed. Any chance of that happening soon?

VRE Management:

All of our 61 new cars will have more durable cup holders for every seat. I am going to look at retro-fitting the Kawasaki's with new cup holders.

Dirk from Clifton, VA asks:

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

VRE Management:

The 11 cab cars have been shipped from Japan and are currently in Milwaukee awaiting final assembly and testing before they enter service at the beginning of next year. The 50 trailers, having just been ordered are still

awaiting construction in Japan, but should begin to arrive at the end of 2007.

Sarge from Manassas, VA asks:

What are the return dates for the Sounder trainsets?

VRE Management:

The first Sounder trainset may be returned at the end of this year, the second may go back in 2007.

Geoff from Woodbridge, VA asks:

How much would it take for CSX to raise the Fredericksburg line speed limit from 70 to 79 mph?

VRE Management:

This would be very challenging. The Fredericksburg Line is very busy with both passenger and freight traffic. Since freight trains never travel above 60mph, raising the speed for passenger trains further would only add to congestion and delays due to other train movements since passenger trains would "catch up" to freight traffic ahead of them much more often.

Marian from Gainesville, VA asks:

After the Sounders go back will the Manassas line finally be seeing use of the Kawasaki cars?

VRE Management:

When the Sounders are returned, we will take a look at our capacity needs and make decisions from there. It is too hard to predict what will be where until then.

Michael from Clifton, VA asks:

Would Norfolk Southern put in a crossover north of the Broad Run station so that 330 would not hold up 321 and 338 would not hold up 329 at Manassas?

VRE Management:

A crossover already exists just north of Broad Run/Airport. The delays to Manassas line traffic are due to needing the train at Broad/Run to clear the single track at the station. That said, we are working to improve on-time performance, as delays to trains 321 and 329 can be avoided when trains 330 and 338 run on-time.

Scott from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

2 questions: 1. Who is responsible to maintain the Fredericksburg Station? There are broken windows and issues with the general decay of the station that need to be addressed. 2. I heard that the Fredericksburg Station received a sizable amount of money from the last federal transportation bill to renovate the station. What is the status/delay in moving that project forward?

VRE Management:

Last year with the help of Congresswoman Davis we were successful in securing over 2 million dollars for the repair of the station. We are currently working with the city to develop a scope of work. Once that is completed we will move forward with repairs.

Chalmers from Woodbridge, Va. asks:

1. A recent Wash Post editorial indicated that the 3rd track on the F'burg line was tied up in the current Virginia legislative stalemate. Is there another funding alternative should this one fail? 2. Is the extension to Gainesville and the Route 29/I-66 upgrade influenced the same way? 3. When will the new bridge near Quantico be completed and how do you expect service to be improved by its completion. Thank you for your time.

VRE Management:

1. VRE has obtained funding through Rail Enhancement Fund for a third track for 11.5 miles of third track from Arkendale to Powell's Creek. I anticipate it will take at least four years to construct. In the meantime I have been working with Speaker Howell to secure funding during this legislative session.

2. We will receive shortly 700k to begin environmental analysis and preliminary engineering between Manassas and Haymarket. Rail cannot be expanded to Haymarket until the I-66 Route 29 interchange is completed.

3. The Quantico Bridge will be completed in Spring of 2007 and should significantly reduce the delays on the Fredericksburg Line. Since the current one track bridge is a choke point now.

Janice from Washington, DC asks:

When will VRE begin using SmartTrip cards and how will that work in purchasing monthly passes?

VRE Management:

We are working towards being able to accept SmarTrip cards as part of a regional fare collection effort. Currently we estimate it will be about 18 months until we can implement it.

Steve from Fredericksburg asks:

Will the quality of the tracks ever improve enough to do away with heat restrictions?

VRE Management:

Never say never. But I don't see heat restrictions going away in the foreseeable future.

John from Arlington, VA asks:

Meet (again) many of the VRE staff this morning at the Quantico train station handing out information, coffee, and donuts. When will you help the overcrowding problem on the train by offering a more healthful alternative to these donuts? I'd suggest some fresh fruit, for example. Many riders take up more than their fair share of seat(s). You're doing a great job with the occasional announcement re: "please move your belongings so that others might sit." But perhaps you can help w/ the overcrowding w/ better treats.

VRE Management:

I am personally thinking about changing our offerings at meet the management. I'll entertain any ideas.

Josh from Lake Ridge, VA asks:

Are the windows on the new gallery cars glass instead of the plastic ones on the Kawasaki's?

VRE Management:

All windows in the new cars will be glass NOT plastic.

J from Fredericksburg asks:

Any news about VRE management? As in, termination of employees. How does this organization justify the most significant spike in fuel costs [recent years] coupled with the most significant spike in rider defection. This should have been a banner time for VRE with double digit increases. You guys dropped the ball on this one. If you can't increase ridership when we were paying \$3/gal at the pump, how will you attract riders when fuel prices are rapidly dropping and eventually stabilize as they are now.

VRE Management:

The decrease in ridership this summer was due to several factors which caused major delays during the first half of the summer, with flooding and record-breaking heat being two major factors. With this severe weather behind us and a renewed commitment from CSX and Norfolk Southern to dispatch our trains more reliably, on-time performance has improved and the decreasing trend in ridership has ended.

Morton from Burke, VA asks:

Friday Sept 1st while enroute home on the Manassas 329 I witnessed a rude man tell a young woman "your feet stink." I was shocked! Yes, the young woman had her bare wet feet propped up on the seat about 18 inches away from the rude man's face but did the man need to hurt her feelings? I only wish I a conductor witnessed this and would have fined the rude man or throw him off the train!!!

VRE Management:

While we do ask and encourage all of our customers to be courteous, our conductors cannot fine passengers or throw them off the train because a comment they made hurt someone's feelings.

Mike from Lorton, VA asks:

I normally take train 311 in the evening. I've noticed that when the train arrives at Crystal City, it sits there for a few minutes. I assume the train is waiting for others to arrive late, via metro? If this is true, why is it happening? VRE never seems to wait for me when I am late to the stop at Lorton. Please advise the conductors so we can resume a normal schedule and not have to wait for others. Isn't this the purpose of a schedule?

VRE Management:

Our conductors do not hold trains for the Metro, but may be delayed in departing stations for other reasons. If the train arrived ahead of schedule, it must wait so it can depart on-time. Additionally, while most customers may have boarded, there may be one or two doors where customers require assistance, that would not be immediately visible to someone at the other end of the train.

Alphonder from Lorton, VA asks:

VRE has had several mechanical problems and locomotive failures over the summer. This illustrates the need for new locomotives, as VRE's are getting to old. What is VRE doing about it?

VRE Management:

We realize our locomotives have not performed as well as they should this summer. While we are looking into new locomotives, funding constraints prevent us from ordering them immediately. In the meantime, we are implementing a locomotive rebuild program to extend the life of our existing fleet and reduce the number of breakdowns.

William Wanker from Woodbridge, VA asks:

I would like to start a VRE cellphone chat club and would like to begin recruiting cellphone pals in other VRE cars and even other VRE trains. I'd also like to recruit Blackberry clubs for train chatter, fun and games! Are YOU GAME? Can we do a live cellphone, Blackberry chat? The possibilities are endlessly exciting!

VRE Management:

While we do hope that as many of our customers have as pleasant of a ride as possible, we cannot support or assist in a live phone chat on-board our trains.

Joseph from Stafford, VA asks:

With the reported VRE losing riders due to various issues and the subsequent losses from FRC, I expect to see another fare increase this year. When will VRE stop making these apparant annual increases?

VRE Management:

We've started looking at the budget for next year and looking at all of the options. I know you are very sensitive to fare increases--I've heard you and I'm with you!

Aseem from Manassas, VA asks:

There was an afternoon train to DC at around 10:30 in the morning. Are there any plans to bring a later Northbound train back?

VRE Management:

I continue to hear from riders and conductors about reinstating train 334 on the Manassas line. Just as I am looking into an earlier train on the Fredericksburg line, I am reviewing the possibility of having 334 returned.

Vince from **Burke VA** asks:

I'd like to compliment one of the EZ bus drivers. Lately, the morning drivers have been a challenge – running late, missing turns, blowing past stops, and traveling at 'an excessive velocity.' Wednesday of last week, we had a driver I'd never seen before, but he was conscientious, timely, courteous, and safe. We can't ask for better! Pass it along.

VRE Management:

Great! I know that the EZ bus drivers will appreciate your compliment. We are glad to hear that you are enjoying your commute with them as well. It's good to know that EZ bus strives for customer satisfaction while maintaining a safe and reliable commute. We will be sure to forward your comment to EZ bus so that they may know of your appreciation as well.

Ken from **Burke, VA** asks:

I'm confused. Different screens are giving different dates (the sixth and the seventh) for the on line forum this month? Is the new plan to take questions on one day and answer the next?

VRE Management:

Sorry for the confusion. This month's online forum was originally scheduled for Wednesday the sixth. We updated our website yesterday announcing that it was postponed until today. We are taking questions and answering them today between 12 noon and 1pm.

Will from **Fredericksburg, VA** asks:

Has VRE entertained the idea of serving refreshments on the train or at least putting in vending machines at all its stations? It sure would be nice to be able to buy refreshments on the trains much like what is done on AMTRAK. Just curious if this question has been asked before.

VRE Management:

Yes this question has been asked before and it is a very good question. Believe it or not, several years ago we did offer café cars. The problem is that they offered very limited seating and they still take up the same amount of room as a regular car.

John from **Fredricksburg, Va** asks:

I would like to ask that all VRE riders be required to keep their shoes on when riding the train. There is nothing worse than a rider putting their smelly feet on the seat next to you. The smell will knock you out, especially on a car that is hot and stuffy because the A/C is not working properly. People are not in their living room and need to be more respectful of others.

VRE Management:

Courtesy issues like these are often the hardest to enforce. We will work with our conductors and reimphasize the need for courteous behavior on our trains.

JP from **Burke** asks:

Is there room in the budget (or demand from patrons) to add more benches at stations?

VRE Management:

We will look into adding benches when we do future platform or canopy extensions at our stations.

Danielle from **Stafford, VA** asks:

Why are the train times so limited? It would seem to me that ridership would increase if there were more sensible options. A train leaving union station at 5:15 gives those of us who get off work at 5 very little time to get to the train on time, esp. if you need to work a few extra minutes like most do. If you map out the VRE train departures against the Metro arrivals down the line to try and catch it elsewhere, you're always a few minutes behind as well. Then the next train isn't for another hour. How about a train in between? A 5:30 or simply start the 5:15 train a few

minutes later?

VRE Management:

If VRE owned its own tracks there would be more flexibility to manipulate the schedule. But since we are currently using CSX and Norfolk Southern's tracks, our schedule is designed around freight and Amtrak passenger trains. Basically each time we change our schedule it affects Amtrak and other freight traffic. We do have plans for sometime next year to build a third track just below Alexandria up to Ravensworth. This will allow our trains to travel on this third track alone without any other train interference.

Jim from Manassas asks:

I ride VRE 327. It seems to be typically 5 to 8 minutes late daily. But when we have a different Engineer, we make it on-time within a minute or so. Also, Tr # 329 & 331 are 99% ontime or even a few minutes ahead of schedule.

Can you explain?

VRE Management:

We hope to address this problem with a schedule change in late October by making 303's departure a few minutes earlier. Thus opening up the trackage for 327.

Michael from Jacksonville, FL asks:

When does VRE expect to have Homeland Security funding available to install the midday layover track just east of L'Enfant Station?

VRE Management:

We received 830k to build a two train storage track at L'Enfant. We anticipate construction will start within two months.

frank from freddieburg va asks:

standard question about Spotsy joining

VRE Management:

Standard answer: continuing to work with them, we have no new news.

Tom from Fredericksburg asks:

In your response to Billy from Stafford, you say the opening of the new Quantico bridge in 2007 it will relieve the bottleneck on the Fredericksburg Line, yet later, you say that initially when it open in 2007, there will be only one track. One track is still one track, how does that solve the issue?

VRE Management:

The new bridge will have one track. The old bridge will remain in service creating two tracks over Quantico Creek.

Sue from Fairfax, Va asks:

VRE increased fares this summer in large part to cover an increase in rising fuel costs. With fuel costs projected to go down by one third over the next few months will VRE be lowering their fares to reflect this change?

VRE Management:

Rising costs in fuel are only one of the many factors that cause our fares to increase. Another slice of the pie includes terrorism insurance since our trains travel through the District. So although we may see a decrease in fuel costs, fares only cover a little over half of our operating expenses. We are constantly reviewing our budget to figure out ways to sustain fares and increase them slightly but just as the cost of living increases, so does the cost of providing services.

VRE Management:

Time always flies during these forums. There are many great questions that we were not able to answer.

I will continue to be working in September to improve on-time performance on both lines. As I have said, we are looking at adding more service on both lines this fall. Plus making other minor schedule changes to improve our

performance. Once we have the details we will be sure to let you know.
That will give us alot to talk about next month. I look forward to answering more of your questions on October 4.
--Dale

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