

# Virginia Railway Express

## Let's Talk!

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



There are currently 26 questions waiting to be answered.

### **VRE Management:**

Thanks for joining me today. Before I move on to your questions, I would like to let you know that (in response to feedback that we have received) we are going to start the process of putting wind breaks at the L'Enfant station. I am hoping, but can't promise that they will be done before Winter.

Second, being the hottest day of the year, I know that A/C issues are important. We have fixed a lot of them, but I know we have more to do. But, on the older equipment it will be difficult to keep the cars cool on a day like today. However, by this time next year, we will have new cars on all of the peak trains and A/C problems should be minor.

On with the questions

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### **Dirk from Clifton, VA asks:**

What is the status of the new railcars and locomotives?

### **VRE Management:**

The new cars are scheduled to begin arriving this December and will be put into service after we receive and "road test" them throughout next year. Since the procurement process for new locomotives will take some time, our Operations Board has given approval for us to lease new locomotives until we can get new ones. We are working on the leases and hope to have newer engines in service within the next two months.

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### **Maria from Manassas Park, VA asks:**

First, I'm a relatively new rider and really love VRE. However, is it possible to get more destination placards placed on the sides of the cars? When there are service delays in the afternoon, sometimes it is difficult to immediately identify which train is which. I'm one of those riders that takes both lines, and utilizes multiple stations depending on the day of the week. I have never gotten on the wrong line, but it can be momentarily confusing. For example, several Manassas line trains do not have the placard on the front of the locomotive and a single placard on the side (Quiet Car), and F'burg has the engine placard, but not many on the side. Its only been a handful of times that I've really encountered this as an issue, but see people asking the conductors all the time which train is which. Thank you!

### **VRE Management:**

The new railcars will have external signs indicating on which line the train is operating. We are working on retrofitting more of our older cars with signs as well.

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### **Danielle from Woodbridge, VA asks:**

Is there a better way to report on delays to those of us at the station? The other morning, we stood at the Woodbridge station for over 40 minutes while the sign there said 'On Time'. If I had known it would be that late, I would have left and driven in. But I kept hoping the train would come and waited....when I got to work there were several emails telling me of the problem, but that doesn't help while I'm at the station. Now with little more than an apology for the delay upon boarding, and a frustrated boss because I'm often delayed, makes for a more annoyed commuter.

**VRE Management:**

Signs and PA at the stations are the best way for us to keep riders informed. Over the last few days, the Woodbridge station signs and PA had difficulties keeping a connection to our communications center over the last few days. It has been repaired.

If the system should have trouble again, we have an 800-RIDE VRE information line that riders can call to get the latest delay information. If your mobile phone or PDA accepts text messages/emails and you have a Train Talk account— it's always a good idea to have this address listed as one of your contacts so that you can receive updates while you're waiting for the train.

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**Bob from Woodbridge asks:**

Two questions...First. Where were the promised "management" for all morning trains at Woodbridge this morning....They were'nt "up and at 'em" for the first train...I was there! Second. 2d time, Are we paying the price for engine neglect on our engines so we can buy new/used train cars? Witnessed by the 2nd/3rd/4th etc. trains on the Fredericksburg line and some of the Manassas line trains as well. We see the emails every day!

**VRE Management:**

First of all, I'm sorry that those on train 300 did not get much time with VRE staff. While most of the staff was there, the person with the tables and goodies was delayed in reaching the station in time for the first train. We will have staff available for train 300 riders tomorrow morning.

Second, we did not forsake new engines to get new rail cars. The procurement process for new equipment takes some time. When we made the decision to get new cars three years ago, our locomotives were working well. We have been given permission to lease newer engines to help us out until we can get new locomotives.

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**Joe from Stafford, VA asks:**

Within the last few weeks, VRE reported that the so called Heat Restrictions of last year were bogus due to the associated other problems. VRE has not reported as many HR this summer - so why are your trains late going south? VRE stated that the trains do not maintain max speed due to Station stops. Yesterday I arrived over 30 minutes late to Brook Station. Which lie is correct?

**VRE Management:**

Neither is a lie. We had 18 heat restriction days in July 2006 and only three of those days in July 2007. Yesterday, we did have heat restrictions, which accounted for 5-10 minutes of delays. But there were also several separate signal problems that contributed to the delays. Since there were two Fredericksburg line trains that were delayed, if you would like to know more, contact [gotrains@vre.org](mailto:gotrains@vre.org) and be sure to indicate which one you were on.

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**John from Fredericksburg, VA asks:**

Smart Cards & Metro checks. How is the new process tied into Metro's smart-card program. If VRE is introducing smart-card capability for fares; Why isn't metro smart-card's being considered; otherwise, I must purchase and have 2 different smart cards and my metro checks will compete with my transportation needs; and add additional costs.

**VRE Management:**

The new program uses Metro's SmartBenefits system. You won't need an additional SmartTrip card. In fact, the one that you have can be used to set up your SmartBenefits account with either CommuterDirect or one of the Arlington County Commuter Stores. If you choose the CommuterDirect option, VRE will pay the mailing fee, so there should be no cost to you. If you need clarification, call us and ask to speak with our fare collections specialist, Mr. Easter.

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**Long time rider from Dumfries asks:**

What's with the newfound concern for my safety regarding crossing the tracks at the Quantico station? For many years I've been riding the train, parking in the lot across from the station, and managing to make the trip from one

side of the tracks to the other without incident. Now suddenly I'm a criminal trespasser being threatened with expulsion from using the train? If you were that concerned for my safety once the new Quantico bridge was built, why didn't the budget include funds for an overpass for the pedestrians to use?

**VRE Management:**

The change is because of the new bridge. Before, only one train could really be in the Quantico station area at any given time. If there were two trains, they would both be going fairly slow. Now, both tracks are high-speed tracks of up to 70 mph. With many freight and Amtrak trains coming through without stopping, someone could get seriously hurt or worse. Regardless, no one should cross the tracks when they are down and crossing lights are flashing.

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**Bob from Burke, VA asks:**

During code orange/red/purple air quality days, some transportation systems (i.e., Fairfax County Connector, Metrobus, Loudon County Commuter Bus) offer free rides in order to increase ridership and lower auto emissions. Has VRE considered participating?

**VRE Management:**

Thank you for asking the question. The program that permits area bus transit agencies to provide free rides on poor air quality days is not available for rail transit agencies.

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**Marlina from Culpepper asks:**

Poop on you for letting poop get on us! The cupola at Broad Run is a favorite perch for birds and, unfortunately, the birds are not trained to point their tails out when they poop. I've noticed that the Manassas Park cupola has some wire mesh inside of it which will at the very least make the birds park their tails away from the opening, if they perch their at all. The same problem exists at L'enfant Station. Please could we get the other station cupolas retrofitted? Thank you!

**VRE Management:**

We put up netting at the Manassas Park and Burke Centre stations to determine their effectiveness. Unfortunately, we have found that the nets create other problems in the process such as birds getting trapped when they find a way in to netting. In addition, we need to remove the netting from both of these stations in order to install the new message signs. Because our stations are out of doors, we can't always keep nature at bay.

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**Brian from Woodbridge, VA asks:**

With the collapse of the I-35W bridge in MN attention has been brought to our nations highway bridges and many of them being structually deficient. How do the bridges for rail traffic fare (specifically the ones VRE uses including the one next to the Woodbridge station)?

**VRE Management:**

Following the Minnesota tragedy, I contacted CSX and Norfolk Southern concerning their bridges. They informed that all bridges are inspected annually --as required by the Federal Railroad Administration-- and they are all structurally sound.

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**Frustrated with Vre from Woodbridge VA asks:**

How come whenever VRE has a Meet the Management function at stations, your trains are running on-time, they are never a few minutes late. But whenever you are not there your trains come into the station 5 minutes late?

**VRE Management:**

I wish that I had that kind of control! If I did, we'd be having Meet the Management every day.

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**Paul from Fairfax, VA asks:**

Lately the air conditioning has not been secured when going thru the tunnel from Union Station on train 333. Is this a change in policy? The fumes get sort of nasty.

**VRE Management:**

There's been no policy change. Train 333 has mostly older rail cars which do not have the same type of damper

control as the newer rail cars.

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**David from Gainesville, VA** asks:

Can you clear up the rumors I've been hearing from fellow passengers re: a proposed (?) extension of VRE to Gainesville. If this is planned, how would it affect Broad Run station. Would it close? Would there be 2 rail lines (since Broad Run and Gainesville are on different tracks). Would they alternate trains from each place? Thanks

**VRE Management:**

Yes, we are working to extend VRE service to Gainesville. Since it is at least four to five years before completion, we have not made any operational decisions on how this might affect Broad Run and current service.

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**J.J. from Falmouth** asks:

I stopped riding the train in the summer months due to the OTP and neverending heat restrictions. Now that I only ride one day a week, it seems I still cannot avoid my once a week commuting disruptions. Am I just hitting the "off-days" or is this the new standard operating procedure for VRE these days?

**VRE Management:**

Despite some intermittent problems, this has been one of our best summers in the last several years. For example, last July's OTP for the Fredericksburg line was 48%. This year, the July OTP was 88%. We still have room for improvement and I'm sorry to hear that you have been riding on our off days.

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**Angry from Fburg** asks:

Why is the entrance to the Fburg Amtrak station blocked by handicapped parking? There was previously two car lanes to allow dropoff. Now its a zoo. When raining I have to get wet because of poor design. What about my rights? Need more parking closer? Build more lots. Why should I have to drop off on a busy street?

**VRE Management:**

We had been getting many comments that the accessible parking was too far from the station. As a result, I worked with the City of Fredericksburg to improve parking for those with disabilities. From your feedback, it sounds like I need to remind those using the Kiss-N-Ride not to have cars waiting in front of the station. Instead, those waiting to pick up riders may need to circle around the block so that the lane through the lot stays open.

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**Davin from Woodbridge, VA** asks:

What's the status of the new PA system? Yesterday afternoon, while waiting for the train I noticed the scroll signs at L'Enfant were removed except for the only working one. The PA system at Woodbridge is broken, resulting in no announcements of delays Monday morning. I saw that someone was working on it this morning.

**VRE Management:**

We are currently installing new signs at all stations. We are trying to work on the larger stations first, along with the ones that currently have sign problems. Hopefully within the next few months, we will have all stations completed. Woodbridge has been fixed.

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**Deb from Spotsy** asks:

We continue to have issues about sanitation of the Fredericksburg Station. I and others gag every morning and evening we walk up and down the stairs. It reeks of urine.

**VRE Management:**

The City of Fredericksburg is responsible for the maintenance at this station. I will contact the City about this.

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**Deb from Spotsy** asks:

What's with the air conditioning on 305, second to the last car. For the past week it has not been working.

**VRE Management:**

I know that our mechanical problems with A/C when they are notified. I will check on the status of this car. As a

side note, I have hired a private air conditioning contractor to help us out.

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**Sarge from Manassas Park** asks:

Why is it that if a good looking woman does not validate her ticket she gets to slide but if a man or an ugly old bag does not validate their ticket they get a court date or at least a scolding from the conductor?

**VRE Management:**

Our crews are required to treat all of our passengers fairly. If you notice a particular problem, please send specific information to [gotrains@vre.org](mailto:gotrains@vre.org). Please include train number, conductor name and/or description, and other details that may help us.

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**Ed from Fredericksburg** asks:

This question is a follow up from one that was asked last month. Regarding the switch north of the Quantico bridge, when the train passes through this area the cars get bounced up and down pretty good. Have you contacted CSX, and is anything going to be done to smooth out this section of track? Considering this section is new, I would expect it to be MUCH smoother than it currently is.

**VRE Management:**

CSX did look at this last month -- after reading it in the forum (Hi! Nancy) -- I will ask them to have an inspector look at it again.

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**Don from Fairfax Station, VA** asks:

The CSX tracks by the Metro yard continuing on the NS line past the split give all the trains a rough ride. Have they been inspected for safety? Can anything be done to make the ride smoother here?

**VRE Management:**

I'll ask CSX, as well as NS, look at their track in this area.

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**tom from spotsy county** asks:

Why can't the volume of the PA systems be lowered? the 1:00 train to Fred (new car) has speakers that almost rattle from the volume. I've asked the conductor repeatedly (about 6 times) to lower the volume with no results...what's up with that?

**VRE Management:**

I know that there are some compatibility issues between the new Gallery cars and the older Gallery cars -- especially the PA systems. Once the new cars arrive and we have complete train sets of one car type, I hope to see these issues lessen. In the meanwhile, I'll see what else we can do.

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**Timothy from Freddyburg** asks:

Are there any plans to run a earlier train than 300? I just started a new shift and have to report to work at 6:00am, so the VRE is no longer an option for me. :(

**VRE Management:**

I am still working with CSX on having an earlier train. But, I don't see it getting to Washington before 6:00 am.

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**Luisa from Manassas, VA** asks:

For your 15th anniversary, how about doing something really special, like bringing back train 334?

**VRE Management:**

In the preliminary budget for next year, I have proposed adding two round trips. One of these is bringing back 334. Hopefully, these additions will show up on your schedule in July, 2008.

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**Birtha** from **Fredricksburg, Va** asks:

I am disappointed that VRE is now serving low calorie snacks at their meet the management tour. Why not offer high fat and low fat food and let us make the decision what we want to eat. Some of us like our full figured bodies. All those tiny pretzels and granola bars do is make me even hungrier for the good stuff.

**VRE Management:**

I enjoyed having the cookies and doughnuts too! The choice to go "low-cal" was the result of rider feedback and budgetary constraints. Simply put, the pretzels and granola bars cost less.

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**Please assist** from **Manassas Park, Va** asks:

I have noticed at the Manassas Park location riders have been exiting the parking lot in the wrong direction, it's more than 1 or 2 cars doing this. Then there are those picker uppers, who park in front of parked cars, blocking cars from exiting their parking spot to leave or they block the whole road so you have to wait on them to move and this causes a domino effect. Can Manassas Park police be notified to monitor the parking lot again, I don't mean leaving an empty cruiser parked on the grass for a week with a dummy inside like they did last year.

**VRE Management:**

I will forward your comments to the City of Manassas Park police for their review. While we can remind passengers to be courteous and safe, the police have the ultimate ability to enforce.

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**Mark** from **Manassas, Va** asks:

Allow me to express to the Broad Run passengers who insist on queuing at the doors at Manassas station; that there is more to life than getting out of a parking lot five minutes early. Running out from the train at a full rate of speed is not only unsafe for you and your physical well being (some of you should have a doctor check you out) but it is also dangerous for the passengers who walk to their cars and have to dodge maniac drivers trying to beat a traffic light. There is more to life than getting home two minutes early, so take some time and stop and smell the roses.

**VRE Management:**

I could not have said it better . . .

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**VRE Management:**

On that note, my time is up. The next session will be on September 12. Enjoy the rest of your summer!

Thanks again for taking the time to chat.

Dale

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