

Virginia Railway Express

Let's Talk!

The next VRE online forum will start on Wednesday, July 11th at 12 noon.



There are currently 59 questions waiting to be answered.

VRE Management:

Thanks for joining me! Another month has come and gone, unfortunately not without some difficulties. Recent delays and cancellations on both lines have not helped us ease into Summer and they are unacceptable. I have marshalled the resources we have at hand -- contractors and supervisors. And they are working day and night to resolve the problems. I am pushing to have the major problems fixed by the end of the week. All the problems seem to involve the electrical systems on the locomotives. With that, on with the show.

William from Fredericksburg asks:

Could you have your mechanics check the A/C in the forward half of car 426, train 303? It is barely tolerable in anything but mild weather. Also, the conductors are only visible during the initial ticket check, if they do it at all, in the quiet car. They should come by more often as tempers sometimes flare when people don't abide by the rules of that car.

VRE Management:

Thanks for letting me know about the A/C problem. I'll have our Director of Rail and Equipment Services ask a mechanical crew to look at unit in that railcar.

I'll also talk to Amtrak about stepping up ticket checks in quiet cars when possible.

Allison from Woodbridge, VA asks:

Recently VRE has had to cancel several trains due to mechanical problems and no FRC's have been issued. Should riders receive a FRC if their train is cancelled?

VRE Management:

Riders should receive FRCs if their train is cancelled. With the recent changes in FRC policy, FRCs should be handed out on the next train for those whose train was cancelled. Riders who miss the distribution may submit a request to our office using an FRC request form. The form may be found on our website at <http://www.vre.org/programs/frc-request.pdf>.

Dara from Warrenton VA asks:

Our government agency is discussing changing from MetroCheck to SmarTrip cards. I'm afraid if they continue with this changeover it will negatively affect my ability to use VRE. I currently buy the monthly ticket - is there going to be some way to buy discounted monthly or 10 trip cards? How will the cards be read? How will the conductors be able to tell whether or not you're paid for your trip? I'm sure other govies are going to be affected by this, so your answer will be greatly appreciated. Many thanks!

VRE Management:

Metro has assured us that Metrocheks will continue to be available for those who use transit providers such as VRE and MARC that do not currently have SmarTrip compatible fare collection systems.

Once the specifications for a regional fare collection system are developed, VRE plans to integrate equipment that will allow riders to use SmarTrip cards as a way to purchase VRE tickets. This way, riders can access their benefits electronically to purchase our tickets. We hope that the final specifications will be available in time for us to have the new system online by the end of next year.

In the meanwhile, we hope to have a pilot program this Fall to help riders being forced over to SmartBenefits.

Doug from Woodbridge asks:

Why were no cars added to train 303 July 3rd? Its a no brainer that the early afternoon trains would be much more crowded the day before a holiday, and I noticed that train had an extra car only the week before. The train was so crowded you couldnt even move. What gives?

VRE Management:

As this was a one day holiday occurring during a week when we usually have lower ridership, we didn't move the longer trainsets up to run earlier service. However, we will keep this in mind for next year when the one day holiday occurs mid-week.

Deb from Spotsy asks:

Is it possible to run a covered walkway along the tracks to the G Lot? This would free-up conggestion of all of us crossing the road and tying up traffic.

VRE Management:

Thanks for the suggestion. Unfortunately it's not possible because the property along the tracks is owned by CSX and it must be kept clear for track maintenance.

Jan from Bumpass, Virginia asks:

How can I get actively involved in the plight to open the Spotsylvania VRE station for riders?

VRE Management:

Talk to your local county and state representatives about your concerns. The more they hear from their constituents, the more they may understand the need for the County to join VRE.

Yay from F'burg, VA asks:

Are you still considering adding an earlier train to the Fredericksburg line?

VRE Management:

The short answer is: Yes. As you know, we currently do not have enough equipment and track access to provide earlier trains. Once we get in additional equipment (over the next year) we can talk to CSX about adding additional trains to our Fredericksburg service.

Esther from Fredericksburg asks:

As the \$10 step-up has greatly reduced Amtrak ridership (at least in F'burg), is the contractual guarantee with Amtrak of 25 seats being met or is VRE now paying for seats which are not being used/paid for by a step-up ticket? And if it's not being met, will you use this next year as a budgetary reason to eliminate the Amtrak cross-honor completely?

VRE Management:

With the change in the \$10 Step-Up ticket, we are also changing the way that we pay Amtrak for VRE riders on their trains to a way that is more equitable and more efficient. We are now paying them based on the number of Step-Up tickets sold per month.

Scott from Burke asks:

Would you comment on the difference of heat restrictions last year and this year? Last year we were told that is was necessary for our safety and we crawled to work and back home. This year, we've had days near 100 and no heat restrictions. What's different this year and why are we safe this year but not the previous years?

VRE Management:

There have been heat restrictions in place this year. However, CSX is handling them differently. Rather than placing blanket orders on the line, they are trying to put slow orders only in known trouble areas, whenever possible. There have been some days that have had blanket heat restrictions, but with the opening of the second bridge at Quantico Creek, their effects have been far less severe than in the past.

Kenny from Stafford, VA asks:

Can you place an ATM in the Quantico station?

VRE Management:

I have chosen not to place ATMs at any of our stations. There are liabilities related to the handling of large amounts of cash that prohibit us from placing ATMs in our stations.

Phil from Stafford, VA asks:

Fredericksburg trains proceeding NORTH from Quantico encounter a serious bump after crossing the trestle at Possum Point. The train wheels (trucks) drop so severely that it seems there is a problem. I think this is in the vicinity of where the train derailed last year. I would be glad to show you where this daily event occurs if you are not aware of this matter

VRE Management:

I'll call CSX today and have someone inspect the track in the next couple of days.

Mark from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

Knowing that the chances were excellent long before the budget passed that VRE would get \$25 million for locomotives, why wasn't the procurement solicitation for the engines completed to coincide with the budget approval? Two years seems like an awfully long time to wait for engines when money is in hand.

VRE Management:

The solicitation is complete and ready to go. But, we do not know when we will receive the \$25 million. In fact, this Thursday night the NVTA will vote on whether the necessary taxes and fees will be levied.

It is my understanding that funds will not be collected until January 1, 2008 -- at the earliest. I don't think that we will actually see the funds until July 1, 2008 -- at the earliest. That's my personal assessment.

Solicitations cannot be issued unless funding is available.

Lori from Occoquan, VA asks:

Why is the Fredericksburg line train 308 frequently delayed or cancelled? What can be done to prevent this?

VRE Management:

Ultimately, my preference is not to cancel any train. After that, I firmly believe that I cannot cancel the last train. When a problem occurs earlier in service, we need to move trainsets up until we are out of options. Unfortunately, this means that on the Fredericksburg line trains #308 and #311 are the most likely ones to be cancelled. Likewise, trains #330 and #335 on the Manassas line are most often likely to be affected.

Keith from Fairfax Station VA asks:

We MUST have later trains. I ride both F'burg and Manassas lines and there are many of us who want or need to go in later than is now possible from locations such as Burke, Rolling Road, Lorton, Woodbridge and Broad Run. How long until VRE adds more trains or adjusts schedules? Not every current and prospective rider is a Pentagon contractor or federal bureaucrat with consistently early hours! Thank you

VRE Management:

Currently, the plan is to add two round-trip trains by July 1, 2008 since the necessary railroad work has been completed and we should have the funds and equipment by then. A likely candidate on the Manassas line is the restoration of Train #334 (mid-morning train). The current desire on the Fredericksburg line is an earlier train. However, we will consider all options before making any decisions.

from asks:

Why is consideration being given to extending a line to Haymarket rather than on current tracks and right-of-way to Nokesville and beyond? Isn't it time service extended out the Rt 28 corridor from Broad Run?

VRE Management:

Our Operations Board considers the extension to Haymarket the number one priority because it would provide the greatest number of riders. In addition, this extension is inside Prince William County which is already a member of VRE. Going south of Broad Run, towards Bealeton, gains less riders and needs Fauquier to join VRE, which they have not yet done.

Alison from Centreville, Va asks:

What suggestions have brought up about running VRE on a limited schedule for Saturdays to DC?

VRE Management:

Currently, we do not have the funding to operate even limited service on weekends. Throughout my discussions with Amtrak about the Step-Up fee, I approached them about re-instituting the weekend cross-honor service. They declined to offer this service to our riders.

Keith from DC asks:

Will a station ever open in Clifton?

VRE Management:

Not in the near future. The town has consistently been opposed to a station.

Gary from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

Can something be done about the windows. Most cars have less than 50% visibility due to a buildup of some kind (looks like between panes).

VRE Management:

The windows you are talking about are Lexan (plastic) which have been permanently damaged by acid in the car wash solution used to clean our rail cars. I intend to replace all the windows in the Kawasaki cars with glass -- which is resistant to acid. Hopefully this will be completed within the year. All 61 new rail cars have glass windows.

Rick from Woodbridge asks:

When will VRE allow regular bicycles on its trains?

VRE Management:

Once we get more of our new railcars in, we will be in a position to allow full size bikes. Currently, the space in the new cab cars can be used for passengers in wheelchairs or bikes. At this time, we prefer to reserve the space for those with disabilities.

Casey from Burke, VA asks:

Two questions: why are there no bike racks at the VRE station in Burke? Also, if I want to ride my bike, why should I be penalized (that is, I have to pay the extra 20% because I don't ride the shuttles.) Is there any other way to offer non-driving incentives? Also, I have tried since last Saturday to subscribe to the shuttle service via e-mail and telephone and have not yet received any response. Thus, I will not be able to fulfill my 15 trips this month anyway. Why is this taking so long?

VRE Management:

As far as bike racks, I will ask Fairfax County if it is possible to put in a temporary rack until they complete the garage construction.

You don't have to subscribe to use the shuttle buses. All of the drivers have incentive cards, feel free to ask for one.

Mark from King George asks:

What was the purpose of the "efficiency test" this morning on the Fredericksburg Train 306? It did not seem very "efficient" during the morning commute... Could this have been done on the "dead head" train VRE runs ??

VRE Management:

I agree that the term "efficiency test" seems like a misnomer. In reality, these are federally mandated tests on your train crew and must be done in the field without advance notice.

George from Burke, VA asks:

Two questions for you. What's meant when a train is 'annulled?' I've seen that several times in notices, and for the life of me, I don't know how that differs from cancelled. We've had two cancelled morning trains for mechanical problems so far this month, so we're seeing that word. What's the fix?

VRE Management:

Technically in the railroad industry, "cancelled" is the term used for when a train is permanently taken out of service. "Annulled," is a one-time occurrence.

We try to use cancelled in our public notifications, but occasionally slip into railroad jargon. For your purposes, the two words mean the same thing.

andrew from Clifton, VA asks:

It's important that VRE reports its timeliness to customers. But a metric missing is the frequency of the unavailability of air conditioning during hot weather. I think this should be reported as well. In fact there is certainly a correlation between customer satisfaction and customer comfort. Late trains are even worse when they are hot. Please consider measuring this aspect of your service. Thank you very much.

VRE Management:

I agree that summer days can be unbearable if one of the A/C units is not working properly. With the arrival of our new cars this winter, I am hopeful for a better summer next year. Until then, we are doing everything possible to work through this summer. I will look into how we can create metrics on this aspect of our service.

Don from Fairfax Station, VA asks:

Could you please update us as to when the audio and visual announcement media at Burke Center might be restored.

VRE Management:

We fixed a component today and hope that it has solved the problem. Construction at the station has repeatedly caused interruptions in phone, electrical, and data circuits there.

Huang from Burke, VA asks:

Why do the EZ buses not service train 332? It doesn't seem fair to not offer this service for the latest (early) train, forcing people who want to obtain the 20% rebate to go even earlier.

VRE Management:

The EZ Bus and shuttle buses serve Train #332. However, they do not serve train #322 -- the first train in the morning. If there is a day when the buses are not arrive for #332 (last morning train), please let us know immediately.

Al from Rippon asks:

I have been riding the F'burg line for over 2 months. The entire time, I have only seen/been asked by the conductor to see my ticket 2 times. This is very frustrating as I purchase a monthly pass and there are several other passengers that use the same FRC every day. Please explain why the conductors don't check tickets!

VRE Management:

Ticket checks are supposed to be random, not every car is checked every day. However, you should find that your ticket is being checked frequently over the course of two months. Please let us know which trains you ride by emailing gotrains@vre.org.

Lester from Fredericksburg asks:

In a recent platform conversation, a passenger asked to whom (which entity) are you accountable? A number of us are curious who evaluates your performance as CEO.

VRE Management:

I report to the VRE's Operations Board, which is made up of elected officials from the jurisdictions that support VRE. Like the rest of my staff, I am evaluated annually.

Esther from Fredericksburg asks:

Why does there seem to be more "mechanical" problems cancelling/delaying trains on the F'burg line than the Manassas line (which you take)? The cancellation of 308 yesterday should have been announced before Amtrak 84 left the station so that passengers could have had an option -- rather than arriving over an hour late to work.

VRE Management:

I am equally frustrated when we have to cancel service, regardless of which line the train operates on. While, I hate to say it, Manassas line trains have also been cancelled recently. Train 330, which is the one I ride, was cancelled twice in the last two weeks. However, if you have a customized Train Talk, you will only receive notification for the trains that affect you. Manassas Line cancellations will not be sent to you. For an accurate look at our delays, you may want to look at our Daily Download page on the website.

Marc from Burg asks:

The April 2007 ridership/consist listing shows that #306/305 trainset with 85 and 50 more passengers respectively than the #308/311 trainset; however the #308/311 trainset has six cars while the #306/305 trainset only has five cars. The majority of those who previously commuted northward on Amtrak 84 now appear to be commuting on VRE #306 which only widens the disparity in passenger count with the #308/311 trainset and is making for rather crowded conditions.

VRE Management:

With the change in the Step-Up tickets, we are monitoring the ridership counts we receive from the crews on the trains that operate near the Amtrak trains. Right now, because of the holiday, the ridership appears to be comparable to the June numbers. However, because of some problems with A/C units, both train sets are currently operating with 5 cars. I will have our staff evaluate the ridership on both trains when the missing car is able to return to service. They will place it where it is needed most.

Diane from asks:

Let me start by thanking you for a wonderful service. However, I do have a concern which I think is a safety hazard. I ride the Fredericksburg train 303 every day. Right before Brooke there are about 10 people who stand up and wait inside the vestibule. However, they do not deboard until Leeland. Once the train leaves Brooke they all stand in the vestibule, even standing on the steps. As you know, it will take one time for the doors to open prematurely and someone falling off. I have mentioned it to the conductor on various occasions, but nothing is being done about it.

VRE Management:

Thank you for bringing this to my attention. I will work with Amtrak, who employs our conductors, to rectify this situation.

Ray from Fredericksburg asks:

The conductor of train 303 mentioned a couple weeks ago that an "early express" train will be starting up in September, leaving Fredericksburg at 4:45 AM. Is there any truth to that rumor or is it all just a load of hooway?

VRE Management:

Unfortunately, no. We are still negotiating with CSX. I don't have a definite start date.

Chuck from Bumpass, VA asks:

Does CSX have more problems with speed restrictions and bent rails because they do not use all the spike holes in the plate holding the rails on the ties? Standing at the L'enfant station, I note that only two of the three holes have spikes. Is CSX trying to save a buck? Why doesn't Amtrak Acela and Metroliners to NYC have speed restrictions?

VRE Management:

Each railroad approaches heat related stress on the tracks differently. We have been working with CSX on reducing the need for blanket speed restrictions. So far this year, we have seen fewer days with speed restrictions than we did last year. With the opening of the second Quantico Bridge, the delays due to heat restrictions have been significantly reduced.

dagunny from Spotsylvania asks:

On the #93 Amtrak there are many open seats. Doesn't Amtrak realize that a few dollars profit per seat is better than no dollars? Why be greedy at \$10. Perhaps passengers need a more proactive advocate to get the stepup amount lowered. Even, at say \$5, more people would ride, giving them more profit. How about a renegotiation?

VRE Management:

I used the same argument with Amtrak several months ago. They did not think that ridership would go down. The last ten days, Amtrak ridership has decreased 80% since the inception of the \$10.00 Step-Up ticket. If it remains that way, I will go back to Amtrak and recommend that they change the Step-Up to \$5.00 (as I originally asked) so that they can gain additional income from an increase in riders.

Ron from Broad Run from Jefferson, VA asks:

Why does VRE waste staff time and resources on foolish items like the current "where's the logo" contest? Do you agree that it would be better to devote your scarce resources to improving the abysmal quality of your service?

VRE Management:

Certainly, I understand your point of view. If we were hosting the large celebrations, like we did in the past, I would agree with you. This is why I have chosen to celebrate with smaller contests, rather than large events. In fact, very little staff time is being used on our 15th Anniversary celebrations. The staff that works on our mechanical and operational services are not involved in the celebration events.

Doug from Springfield, VA asks:

I've heard that the reason we don't have a food/beverage car is due to the cost that such a car would incur in extra track space. Has there been any study of the revenue such car would bring if sent north selling coffee/juice/breakfast in the morning and south selling coffee/juice/beer/snacks in the evening, consisted in the middle of whichever trains average the most riders? It would be interesting to see if a ridership survey showed that such a car might pay for itself, and what the shortfall might be if not.

VRE Management:

We did have snack cars on select trains several years ago. We removed them from service because our storage yard in DC is very constrained. We couldn't justify using the space for a car that could only seat 40 people. They also didn't make any money. As our budgets got tighter, we were not able to justify subsidizing the service.

VRE Management:

Well, I've over run my time. But I've enjoyed our discussion. I will continue to work on our performance and air conditioning issues. Hopefully when we chat again, things will be much better. Our next session will be August 1. I look forward to chatting with you then.
Dale

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