

Virginia Railway Express

Let's Talk!

The next VRE online forum will start on Wednesday, March 7th at 12 noon.



There are currently 74 questions waiting to be answered.

VRE Management:

Good Afternoon! It's been a while, with the last month's unexpected cancellation. But, the technical difficulties with the site have been resolved and I am happy to be able to host our lunch time chat again this month. Before I start answering questions, there are a couple of quick topics that I want to address.

VRE Management:

1) The General Assembly has passed their transportation budget. In it is \$25 million a year for VRE. If signed into law, I plan to use that money to purchase brand new locomotives for our fleet. There is still some work to do and the Governor still has to sign the bill. If you have an opinion that you would like to share with the Governor visit the feedback portion of his website at www.governor.virginia.gov/AboutTheGovernor/contactGovernor.cfm.

VRE Management:

2) We have received quite a bit of feedback about our proposals on the FRC and the Step-Up program. While I couldn't keep the programs the way that they have always been, I have made some recommendations to our Operations Board based on the spirit of compromise. I am recommending that the FRC program remains, but the time requirement will be extended to one hour instead of 30 minutes. We will also make some other administrative changes to make the program more efficient. I am also recommending that the Step-Up fare reflect the price that we must pay Amtrak. However, I have written to the Amtrak CEO to see if Amtrak to see if they will reduce their cost to us, which will reduce the cost of your Step-Up ticket. Both of these items are still pending, and I hope to come back to you soon with the final resolution in the next few weeks.

VRE Management:

OK. On with the questions...

Rob from Haymarket asks:

Will you be able to recover losses from Kang or Nadar's ? How about the handbags or real estate in Mexico? I would hate to see these \$200k losses passed onto fellow riders in ticket price increases, FRC cancellation and Amtrak Step-ups.

VRE Management:

While I can't comment on the particulars because it is still a legal matter, I can say that even if this event hadn't happened, we would still have had a significant budget deficit for the upcoming year. The deficit started at nearly \$9 million and through program cuts, we were able to reduce it.

Dirk from Clifton, VA asks:

What is the current status of the new gallery car trailers and new locomotives?

VRE Management:

The new trailer cars are in production and will start arriving in December. The status of new locomotives is more tricky. That is dependent on whether the transportation bill is signed into law. We're keeping our fingers crossed.

Sarge from **Stafford, VA** asks:

The Quantico Creek bridge is complete. Where are the two additional trains you promised?

VRE Management:

Well, the bridge is almost complete. There is still more work to be done. We expect it will be completely finished the first week of April. In the meanwhile, I am working with CSX to determine when and how we can add more service. Some of it also depends on being able to fund the new trains, crews, etc.

Erik from **Fredericksburg, VA** asks:

Why don't conductors hand out FRCs on the day of a delay? Waiting until the next day only invites the fraud you recently expressed concern about, not to mention the admin cost of mailing FRCs.

VRE Management:

We would prefer that the FRCs are handed out at the time of the delay. Sometimes, if the crew is working a mechanical issue, they may not be able to hand them out. As part of the changes to FRC program, we are working to make this as efficient as possible.

Stanko from **F'Burg** asks:

Could someone update the Board Minutes for Feb '07? "minutes are posted within two weeks following a meeting".

VRE Management:

I will look into that.

Gasping4 Airestill from **Falmouth** asks:

Train 307 slowly is killing us with its fumes still. Problems were found with the engine, but when I board at Crystal City, the diesel fumes are overwhelming. Please help us before we all die from carbon monoxide poisoning.

VRE Management:

We removed the locomotive that was causing the problem some time ago. If you are still experiencing the problem, it may be the result of the fumes in the tunnel leaving Union Station. I will have someone ride the train and check it out this week.

Norma Jean from **Fredericksburg, VA** asks:

If and when Spotsylvania agrees to join VRE and a station gets built, will the new station be included with Zone 9 or will a new Zone be established. I know that you stated a while back that Zones are determined by miles.

VRE Management:

At this time, I believe that it would be a new zone.

John from **Manassas, VA** asks:

I've observed the trash pickup at the Manassas Park station a couple of times in the past few weeks and the individual picking up the trash combines it in the same bag with the recycle newspapers. Is the trash a VRE responsibility or a City of Manassas Park responsibility?

VRE Management:

They are supposed to recycle the newspapers. We will work with our maintenance crews to make sure that they do so.

Jim from **Manassas** asks:

How about an article in "Train Talk" that features the Engineer of our Train. He has a complex job, with a control panel (with lots of bells and whistles) a radio, and must contend with other train traffic, deer on the tracks, and

grade crossings. I would find his job to be very interesting to share with our riders.

VRE Management:

We have had articles in the past about the different jobs on the railroad. It's been a while since we have had one. We will look into having another in the near future.

Paul from Burke asks:

Now that you've got money for locomotives, can you revisit putting a windbreak at L'Enfant? But the windchill in single digits and have your train just a few minutes late and it is miserable standing on that platform.

VRE Management:

We don't have the money yet -- only if the transportation budget passes. If it does, wind breaks will be one of the first projects completed. I promise!

Nick from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

Train 309 consistently does not display the correct station information over the scrolling screen. There are several deaf passengers who rely on other passengers to ensure that they are at the right stop. How can that be fixed?

VRE Management:

This is one of those "punch list" items we are still working on with the new cab cars. We hope to have this warranty work resolved soon.

Marcus from Manassas, VA asks:

What are the long term goals as far as what the VRE Fleet will consist of. Is the goal to replace all the current cars with the new style and retire all the older style or is it the plan to operate some type of mixed fleet? If it is a mixed fleet, how do you see the cars distributed?

VRE Management:

The fleet will be mixed for a time, until we receive all of the new cars. At that time, I expect that there will be a few of the older cars left. Since we are still working on the warranty issues with the new cab cars, we haven't made any decisions about the placement of future cars yet.

B from Manassas asks:

Is the four car consist on Train 335 permanent? This train can get very crowded and on peak days there are often people standing after Alexandria. I feel like this train has been shortchanged cars ever since it lost the Sounders in December.

VRE Management:

The Sounders will not return to that train. We recently moved the train to 4 of the new cars to see how well they work together. Now that we have that information, we will add another older car.

Nick from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

What is your goal for email response time? Currently response time is between 5-7 days.

VRE Management:

We try to answer emails within 5-7 days. When we have delays, the number of emails that we receive increases dramatically and creates a longer turnaround time. I know there is a backlog now and will see what we can do to reduce it. (of course, improving our on-time performance goes a long way to improving our email volume!)

Bob from Woodbridge, VA asks:

Please tell me the policy for issuing the free tickets again. Last year it was that if you were inconvenienced today, you got a free ticket today....I know because I asked the question. Now that obviously has changed. Please, what is the policy?

VRE Management:

The policy is the same as last year. They are supposed to be given out at the time of the delay. I know there are times when extenuating circumstances prevent the crews from doing so. I will work with Amtrak to make this a higher priority.

RP from Fredericksburg asks:

We know it will be about 18 months from the decision date to join a regional transportation system that uses SmartTrip cards. When will that decision be made?

VRE Management:

VRE is committed to joining the regional SmarTrip system. We are in the process of identifying modifications to our fare collection equipment that will allow SmarTrip use. Implementation is anticipated by the end of 2008. We are also exploring interim options to allow use of SmarTrip cards to purchase VRE tickets. Look for information on this in the coming months.

Dean from Rippon, VA asks:

On Monday, 26 February, Train 302 loaded at Rippon, but began to creep forward at least 5 meters as passengers were still loading. Shortly after, the doors closed and the train continued. When I notified the conductor his response was "oh, I guess the brakes slipped." To me, this is clearly a critical safety violation that certainly deserves more attention than the off-the-cuff response which I received. Why were no safety checks done after the "brakes slipped". But more importantly, where was the conductor at when it happened, and why did he not notify the engineer to stop it?

VRE Management:

Thanks for letting me know. I'll look into this.

Lorraine from Stafford, VA asks:

I read in today's VRE Update that the next set of new cars will have more insulation around the doors to eliminate the draftiness experienced on the most recent additions to the VRE fleet. Is there anything that can be done about the ones we already have? The cold air comes through the windows, particularly the seats on the lower level, cab end of the cab car. Also, why didn't the VRE purchase more Kawasaki cars instead of more gallery cars? Nothing about the new cars compares with the Kawasaki's in comfort, access, or capacity. You can't see if there are empty seats in the upper level.

VRE Management:

The weather stripping will be fixed first in the cars that we currently have. Once we know that the fix is working, it will be implemented in the rail cars that have yet to be delivered. As for the choice to purchase these cars, only one company bid on our requests for proposals.

William from Quantico asks:

It would be quite helpful to those of us that sit in the Quiet Car if signs can be placed in the upper level. If the signage isn't there to serve as a reminder, passengers often forget which car they are in. The signs really assist in enforcing the rules.

VRE Management:

When the cars get moved around, the signs are often not moved accordingly. I'll make sure that the signage is improved.

Dennis from Woodbridge, VA asks:

What is the age of your engine fleet? After the breakdowns that occurred this past Tues (06 Mar) and last month are there any plan to replace or overhaul the existing engine fleet? These breakdowns further reinforce the perception that VRE is an unreliable mode of public transportation and that people in N. Va should look elsewhere for a reliable means of transportation to and from work.

VRE Management:

The majority of our locomotives are nearly 30 years old. They went through a major rehab process when we

bought them 15 years ago. With the money allotted to VRE in the transportation bill, we hope that we can go forward with a purchase of new locomotives.

Nick from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

V711 & V712 Cab cars do not seal at the front doors allowing wind and weather to come through. What is the timeframe expected to fix these issues?

VRE Management:

We have identified this as one of the "punch list" items that the manufacturer needs to address. I expect it to be complete in the next few weeks.

Esther from Fredericksburg asks:

Has there been any progress regarding a new Fredericksburg ticket vendor?

VRE Management:

There is some progress. We have found a vendor that we think will be beneficial to our Fredericksburg riders. There are still some set-up issues that need to be resolved. Once we get everything squared away, we'll be ready to make our announcement, hopefully by the end of the month.

Randy from Manassas VA asks:

Does VRE have a plan to quickly evacuate the city? When the Federal Government closed at 1300 two weeks ago, I watched as a Manassas #327 (3:45PM) VRE train bypassed Crystal City and Alexandria. There was more than enough time available to reconfigure trains to account for the increase riders due to early release of employees. Evening trains (#333-#337) would be virtually empty.

VRE Management:

There is a difference between a mandatory evacuation and an early dismissal due to snow. If there were a full-scale evacuation, VRE would work closely with the government to assist. In addition, CSX would stop operating their trains through the area and allow us the latitude we would need to evacuate, assuming the authorities have not closed the tunnel out of Union Station or the bridge crossing the Potomac.

Deb from Fredericksburg asks:

Is VRE looking into the DoD Smart Benefits Card?

VRE Management:

VRE is working to modify our TVMs to accept the Smart Card. We are also looking at options to enable riders to use the Smart Benefit Program to purchase VRE tickets. Look for more information in the coming months.

Paul from Burke, VA asks:

Why are the seats on the new cars so uncomfortable? All of the other cars (including the old gallery cars) are more comfortable than the new ones.

VRE Management:

Here's one thought -- stay tuned for the other side.

Mike from Manassas Park asks:

The Manassas Park station has improved since the platform was rebuilt and the train has been reliable. I like the new cars!

VRE Management:

Here's the other side. It's hard to please everyone, but we'll keep on trying.

Marianne from Burke asks:

Could the conductors occasionally remind riders to not speed in the parking lots? Lately in the Rolling Road parking lot there have been a lot of near-misses with cars racing down aisles almost hitting parking cars and pedestrians. Thanks.

VRE Management:

We can do that. I'll also ask that our Superintendent of Operations, Safety and Security work with the local police departments to see if they can patrol in the evenings and monitor this kind of driving behavior.

Steve from Broad Run asks:

Just wanted to let you know how much I like the new cars. Bright and comfortable, all we need is an in-flight movie. Thank you

VRE Management:

Here's another comment on the new cars!

RJ from Fred'burg asks:

I think you were duped with the new cars. They are drafty and cold. There are no tables so folks can get work done. There are no modesty panels for the upper level. The seats are only slightly more comfortable than the existing gallery car seats, but no where near as comfortable as the Kawasaki cars. They need more padding. Can you dump the gallery contract and go for the Kawasaki contract?

VRE Management:

And yet another one . . .

Essie wilson from culpeper, va asks:

why dont they add more afternoon trains? Currently if you don't catch the train leaving around 1pm then you have to wait until 4 to get home if you have to leave work early, or if the employer (mainly Fed government) chooses to shut down early. Is there any plans in the near future to run at least one more afternoon train in between the 1 and 4 o'clock?

VRE Management:

We are limited in the number of trains that we are allowed to operate. With the Quantico Bridge and other projects, we will be permitted to have more trains. The questions then become when will they run and where will we get the funding to operate them. As the Quantico Bridge is nearly complete, we are examining these questions in great detail and will be looking at all of the feedback that we get from riders to answer them.

Regina from Fredericksburg asks:

I started riding VRE in Oct. 2006 and was fully aware of some of the one-time issues I would be confronting. I must say that it's been a great commute compared to 15 years on I-95. When there have been delays, the professionalism shown by VRE conductors, staff, and management has been appreciated.

VRE Management:

Thank you.

Diane from Fairfax asks:

With the Burke parking lot being under construction it has forced many of us onto the shuttle buses. A great idea and benefit, however the Connector Bus Drivers often do not carry the equipment to validate our EZ bus passes which we are required to have to receive our discount. Can this be corrected, currently I have missed four validations in the past 10 days?

VRE Management:

We'll work with Fairfax Connector to see if this can be remedied.

Bill from King George asks:

Standing on the platform and hearing "Silicone Sally" saying the train is delayed 10 minutes due to equipment or OTM has become an all too frequent occurrence lately. Usually the 10 minute delay increases to 15 or more, but yet the announcements repeat themselves. Can there be announcements from a human with some realistic delay updates?

VRE Management:

Predicting delays is not an exact science. For instance, a signal delay can be a 10 minute delay or it can shut down the whole railroad for hours. For that reason, we generally don't try to predict. Instead, we give out what the current delay is. If we can give a general time estimate that we think is reasonable, we will.

Nancy from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

Why can't all questions be answered even after the session is over? I know it takes time, but if we write to the VRE directly, someone still has to answer our questions. If we take the time to ask a question, the least you can do is to take the time and post the answers at the end of the report that is generated. Courtesy is as courtesy does...

VRE Management:

I understand your point. The truth is, we get many duplicate questions and many questions that are, quite frankly, inappropriate for this type of forum. With over a hundred questions that are generated each month, the staff would not be able to keep up with their regular questions in addition to those that are emailed to our gotrains address.

Marge J from Woodbridge VA asks:

Can the VRE office facilitate in getting VDOT to snow plow the main (lower) parking lot at Rippon? It was not plowed at all the last two snows and was very dangerous. Also three riders fell on the first tier stairs in the main lot walking to the station (during the first ice/snow storm) Many thanks! Marge/Rippon Rider

VRE Management:

We were also concerned about the inattention to the Rippon Station. While VDOT clears the highways and main arteries first, we feel that they should have had ample time to address our lot. Hopefully today's snow will not amount to much, but if it does we will be working with VDOT to get the Rippon lot cleared.

Donald from Manassas, VA asks:

Is the construction work going on at L'Enfant Plaza for the new third track?

VRE Management:

The project has started. We anticipate that it will be complete by this Fall. Incidentally, this project includes storage tracks that we are building with a grant from Homeland Security. This will help should we need to evacuate the city.

Dale from Dale City, VA asks:

What is the status of the new electronic systems to be installed at the train stations?

VRE Management:

This project is in the works. New variable message signs are being designed for all of our stations. We expect all stations to have new signs by the end of the year.

Wikle from Fredericksburg asks:

What has been happening with 302? Was it really a deer hit 2 weeks ago that shut down the whole train or are their hidden issues with the new cab cars? I see that there were issues on Tuesday that prevented the cab car from taking the lead.

VRE Management:

Yes, it was deer that caused the problem on 302 a few weeks ago. Many of you may have been on a train before that has hit a deer. I don't want to get into gruesome details (which is why it was described as track debris). Sometimes, it is just the angle that it gets hit. This time it knocked some wires loose in a control box under the

car. Yesterday, 302 was experiencing problems with its brakes. A second locomotive was placed on as a precaution, but we believe that it was not the cab car, but one of the trailers that caused the problem.

Karen from Spotsylvania, VA asks:

I travel to Europe often and take the train everywhere. I noticed that passengers are allowed to open the door to the car to either enter or exit. Obviously, the doors cannot be opened until the engineer releases the lock. This allows very quick loading and unloading. Why can this not be done on VRE? Having limited access wastes precious time. Thanks, Karen

VRE Management:

All of our trains have automatic doors. They should all open, unless they are not "platformed." Much of what we do that differs from our European counterparts is cultural based. We have a more litigious society that has brought about stiff regulations.

Elizabeth Robinson from Bristow, VA asks:

When the Haymarket/Gainesville station opens, will we lose some trains to Broad Run (reduced service)? I know this has been discussed before and that any changes are far off in the future, but I'm trying to understand how you are going to split off trains at Manassas with some going to Haymarket/Gainesville and others going to Broad Run? If it does mean reduced rail service, will there be a connector bus between Gainesville and Broad Run (travelling down Linton Hall Road) to get us back to our cars?

VRE Management:

I don't think that the Gainesville/Haymarket extension will mean less service for our Broad Run riders. Since this project is still in its planning stages, we haven't started with the operational decisions. Once this project begins construction, we will be in a better position to start making some of those decisions.

David from Gainesville, VA asks:

Announcements on some cars are often ear-splittingly loud (even on the brand new cars). I spoke with a conductor but he said he had no control over the volume. Any chance of correcting this problem so my eardrums don't burst?

VRE Management:

The old gallery cars and new cars are not interfacing well with the PA system. Some announcements are coming through extremely loud. We are working hard to correct those problems. The manufacturer of the new car PA system is correcting this as part of the punch list of items that need to be fixed.

Yay from F'burg, VA asks:

Are you still considering adding an earlier train to the F'burg line?

VRE Management:

Yes. As the railroad projects complete and we are permitted to add trains, I will attempt to add an earlier morning train on the Fredericksburg line. I do not currently know what the departure time will be.

Donovan from Fredericksburg asks:

Can VRE purchase Hybrid Locomotive.

VRE Management:

Yes. But none exist right now. But, we are looking at purchasing new locomotives and when we do they will be more fuel efficient and environmentally friendly.

Ed from Fairfax VA asks:

The Burke Centre situation is about as customer un-friendly as can be. The parking lot and entry road is a mess - muddy and potholed. It's a five minute walk from the far parking lot to the station. The alternative to shuttle from

the St Mary's church parking lot require you to be there 25 minutes before train time. Why not have the shuttles leave from their parking lot 10 minutes before train time and go direct to the station - its only a 3 minute drive? The situation right now is driving me away from VRE.

VRE Management:

I know that the situation has been difficult for riders. We have forwarded all of the concerns that have been sent to us to the project managers at Fairfax County. The good news is the potholes have been paved and other improvements are on the way. You should notice them in the next two weeks.

Bernie from Burke, VA asks:

Would you please remind the Conductors to be more mindful of where they store the steps that are needed at Alexandria once they leave that station? One of the three passages off a Gallery Car can be blocked when the Conductor hangs it on the platform side handrails. They seem to be in hurry, but this slows down the unloading process as we dodge around the step.

VRE Management:

I will talk to Amtrak to see if this practice can be changed.

matthew from stafford, va asks:

Are you planning on adding later trains in the morning to the fdburg line? When schools are delayed, or we have a morning appointment, there is no train service available after 8:28 (from woodbridge)

VRE Management:

We know that there are many differnt options that our riders would like to see: earlier trains, later trains, afternoon trains and express trains. When we are in a position to add more service, we will look at all of these options and try to make the best decision for everyone.

VRE Management:

That's all the time I have for today. There were a lot of questions about reliability and new locomotives. To accomplish this we need more funding. If you feel strongly one way or the other, please pass along your comments to Governor Kaine. There is a link from our website.

See you next month,

Dale
