

Virginia Railway Express

Let's Talk!

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



There are currently 50 questions waiting to be answered.

VRE Management:

Happy September! We're all back to work and school. I've been flipping through the questions submitted so far and there are a lot of good ones! So, if you don't mind, I'm going to get right down to business and get started.

Dean from **Stafford** asks:

Why are you having so much trouble with the air-conditioning?

VRE Management:

The Gallery cars were not built for our temperatures. The good news is that our new cars are. They will begin arriving in December. We will receive 5 a month for 10 months. You will notice the difference next summer.

AI from **Springfield, VA** asks:

What happened to the project that VRE was going to build a storage yard at L'Enfant Plaza? You got money from the Department of Homeland Security for it.

VRE Management:

The one storage track is nearly complete. There is still some ballast work that needs to be done. I expect that we will begin using that track next summer. We are working on determining which trains will terminate at L'Enfant and use those tracks.

Bill from **Fredericksburg** asks:

Train 300 the other day had a minor problem with a valve (?) that caused us to stop several times. I ride the Quiet Car and the PA system was not working properly. When I debarked at CC I told the conductor servicing that car about the PA system. He responded that he knew but opined that it may be the mic the conductor used instead of the PA system. He further stated that he was not allowed to use a different mic unless granted permission. Whether true or not, those of us in the quiet car were clueless about what was going on. Not a good situation in an emergency.

VRE Management:

Thank you for letting me know. I will look into this and check on both the P.A. system (mic and all) and the crew's method of making announcements.

Vonda from **Va** asks:

How difficult is it to make the 309 leave union at 5.30pm? Many people miss the 5.15 leaving union station, would truly love to leave for home before 6pm.

VRE Management:

The issue wouldn't necessarily be changing our train, but making sure that the change would fit into the overall scheduling of other trains, especially at Union Station. There is a schedule change at the end of October, but it is too late to consider a change to train #309 this time around. We will evaluate your suggestion when we start

looking at changes in the spring.

Ken from Burke VA asks:

Please remind the crews to load sand in the engine sand hoppers. Fall will be here soon and it'll soon be time for the oak leaf oil to strike...

VRE Management:

Too true! I know a lot of people don't believe us when we talk about leaf oil. If you have access to the archives of the Wall Street Journal, they wrote an interesting piece on the delays that occurred throughout the East Coast as a result of leaf oil.

Arthur from Burke asks:

How much ridership have you lost from the Burke Centre station since blowing up our parking lot? What is the estimated date when we will have sufficient parking?

VRE Management:

I don't have good estimates on exactly how much ridership has been lost at Burke Centre, but I know it has been significant. We knew this would happen, simply because of the fact that the garage had to be built on the existing lot. Hopefully, next summer it will all have been paid off.

Larry from Broadrun asks:

Are the new head cars a reasonable design? It seems that we're having more problems after hitting track debris. It seems the new cab cars are more vulnerable. Does VRE need to add some protection (shielding or such) to better deal with debris? It's a shame the crews seem to need loping shears and saws again. Did we end up with the low bid and get low grade equipment?

VRE Management:

The delay on Monday did not have anything to do with the type of cab cars that are being operated. In fact, it was a Sounder set that initially hit the tree. The remainder of our trains were delayed while they waited for crews to remove the tree and inspect the tracks that it would be safe for trains to pass over. This would have happened no matter what kind of equipment we ran.

Marilyn from Broad Run VA asks:

My neighbor and I took the VRE to take our grandchildren to the DC museums before school opened. We were asked questions that we couldn't answer, so we promised we would ask them here. Mark, 12 asks: How much fuel do your trains hold? How far can you go on it? Graham, 10 asks: How do you become a VRE Engineer?

VRE Management:

Great questions from some smart kids! Depending on the locomotive somewhere between 1700 and 2500 gallons. At about 3 gallons per mile, we can go around 500 to 800 miles per tank. In order to become an engineer, most railroads require you to start as a brakeman, then be promoted to a conductor, then be promoted to an engineer. Our engineers are Amtrak employees who bid into VRE service.

rob from gainsville, va asks:

There are some idiots feeding the pigeons from the L'efant platform. Can you have them tared and feathered--the idiots not the pigeons? I can suggest a source for the feathers.

VRE Management:

We have talked to some of the people that are feeding the pigeons and asked them to stop. But, I also know that for some people the best part of their job is being able to feed the birds. It is one of those tough issues that doesn't have a clear cut answer. It is even debated here at VRE.

Ron from Bristow, VA asks:

I've been riding the Manassas line for 3 months and hold my breath every time we take the crossover north of Backlick RD about 50 mph. I've never seen a commuter train cross a switch that fast and it worries me. Is that an approved speed or are a few engineers playing cowboy?

VRE Management:

You are referring to the switch called the Edsall Switch. It is a 45 mph switch and our trains usually go through it a few mph less than that. In addition, it is regularly inspected by Norfolk Southern.

Scott from Fredericksburg asks:

Is there any quality control at the factory on the new rail cars? I ride in the cab car on 304 and have been through V710, V712 etc. All of these cars have had the same problem with bad seals on the front door. Since February, we have had rain, snow, bad drafts and plenty of bugs INSIDE the car. You can see daylight under the door. This morning a new car V714 appeared and once again it was quite breezy. Also, the cleaning crews have not done a good job scrubbing the walls and removing all the bugsplat from swatted bugs. Many stains have remained after several months.

VRE Management:

The door seals are a warranty item and it will be corrected. The manufacturer is designing a fix. Secondly, I will have the cleaning crews detail the interior of the cars.

rob from gainsville, va asks:

the new cars only have outlets by the doors. Can you have more installed?

VRE Management:

I looked into having outlets in the new cars when we originally designed them. To have outlets put into all the new cars it would have cost us an additional \$3 million. I know that having outlets would be "nice to have." But at that cost, they were not "need to have."

Andy from Manassas, VA asks:

One final question regarding parking options, not just at Broad Run but throughout the system. In my previous life I was a commuter on New Jersey Transit, and one of the options it implemented was to install--and rent--at some of its stations. As someone who lives approximately six miles from Broad Run, I would rent such a locker in a heartbeat (depending on price, of course) so I could ride my bike to the station at least twice a week. Any chance we'll see this as an option?

VRE Management:

Since 9/11/01, bike lockers have fallen out of favor and need to be located some distance from the station. I'll ask Prince William County what their feelings on this are and see if they would be willing to fund them.

RJ from F'burg, VA asks:

With yesterday being the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, I was wondering what are VRE's plans regarding the mass exodus of workers from DC in the event another evacuation is needed? Since a lot of people use other means to get to DC, will tickets be waived to help get the most people out as possible?

VRE Management:

Should a similar situation occur, I do not know what kind of service VRE would be able to implement. The new storage tracks at L'Enfant will help us avoid problems if the First St. train tunnel is closed. However, I highly recommend that everyone have at least two options to get out of the City. One that includes VRE and one that does not.

Beverly from Fairfax, VA asks:

By the way love riding the train, it beats driving any day of the week. The Conductors are terrific. Are they going to extend the canopy and wind screens at the Burke Station? When it's cold, rainy and the wind is blowing, it can get very crowded in our tiny shelters at Burke.

VRE Management:

As a part of the garage construction, the platform will be extended south with a canopy and wind screens. We want to extend the canopy north on the existing platform, but have been unsuccessful in finding a contractor to do it at a reasonable cost. We will keep working on it.

Mike from Woodbridge, VA asks:

Those new variable message signs at L'Enfant plaza are nice. Someone once suggested putting railtime on them - you have the room. Those of us standing near the rear of the platform can't see them well. I can't wait to see that at Woodbridge, where currently only one of the old signs are working.

VRE Management:

The new variable messaging signs will be installed at all stations. We anticipate the installation to be complete by the end of October. I like the "Rail Time" idea and will look into it.

Debbie from Stafford asks:

Why can we only use the Smart Benefits option if we purchase out tickets in Arlington? It seems kind of obvious to me that there aren't too many VRE riders living or working in Arlington. Can anything be done to have the current vendors able to accept Smart Benefits? Please don't suggest the mail program. My mailbox is one that is shared with about 20 other townhouses and I often get mail for my neighbors in my mailbox.

VRE Management:

I know that the SmartBenefits option that we have been promoting is not perfect for everyone. However, it does act as a stop-gap measure until our fare collection system can accept SmarTrip cards for payment.

Ron from Leeland St. asks:

Any progress on adding more early afternoon train options on Fridays?

VRE Management:

There are a few questions in here about adding more train service. I am hoping to add an earlier morning train on the Fredericksburg line, to restore the mid-morning Manassas line train, and to add later evening service on both lines. All of this is contingent upon negotiations with our host railroads. Look for possible changes next Summer.

Phil from Quantico asks:

Northbound and Southbound trains still experience a severe "drop" at the Possoms Point Switch. Last forum the tracks were to be inspected. The problem still exists and is in the vicinity of the detailment for train 304.

VRE Management:

The switch has been inspected three times and no problems were found. We will ask our CSX representative to ride a train through this area. Since part of the problem could be equipment-related, please email "Gotrains" with your train and car number.

Angie from Manassas, VA asks:

I regularly ride train #330 home each week. At least once a week we have to stop for about 5 minutes after Alexandria and before Backlick Road to allow #338 to come through. A week or two ago the dispatcher actually forgot about us and we sat for over 10 minutes waiting on permission to move on. I understand that #338 has to come through, but it's frustrating knowing that priority is given to a practically empty train while our full train sits there. Can anything be done to re-time these two trains so that #330 can travel normally?

VRE Management:

We did build some wait time into our schedule for these types of "meets." I will have our operations staff keep an eye on this and see if we need to readjust the schedule in the spring.

Andy from Manassas, VA asks:

Now that summer is over and the commuter crunch is over, parking is once again at a premium at Broad Run. --

Would it be possible to have the oldest lot restriped? This lot has had two different sets of parking spaces over the years, and in recent years both sets of parking spot lines have emerged, causing both confusion and a loss of spaces as some parkers use one set and some use the other. Fresh striping could reclaim at least half-a-dozen spots.

VRE Management:

VDOT is responsible for the improvement to the striping at the old Broad Run lot. We have asked them for several years now to repaint the stripes. Each year they indicate that it will be in the next year's budget to make the changes. It is in their budget for 2008, but I'm trying to get it pushed up.

Dan from Woodbridge, VA asks:

When will construction begin at the Woodbridge Station?

VRE Management:

Assuming we receive a successful bid, construction should start in December of this year. A second platform with a pedestrian overpass will be built.

Pat from Fredericksburg asks:

Would it be possible to publish something asking the riders that wear fragrances like perfume or aftershave to think of other riders and not put on so much? If you can smell it more than a few seats away it is too much.

VRE Management:

You got it. I'll have this addressed in the next VRE Update.

Douglas from Fairfax asks:

I was on the Manassas train that hit the debris on Monday. Congratulations to VRE and the crew for maintaining a safe ride. My question is this: how close were we to derailment?

VRE Management:

You were not close to a derailment at all. I was also glad that the crew maintained your safety.

Steve from Fredericksburg asks:

Has there been any progress regarding a new VRE station in Spotsylvania?

VRE Management:

No new news.

Susan from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

Who is responsible for cleaning the Fredericksburg station? The smell is so bad on the steps up the track 2 side I feel like I need another shower. Over the years I have used many of the stations on the Fredericksburg Line and none are as dirty as the namesake station is. Also why is the smoking/no smoking areas not marked like at other stations?

VRE Management:

The City of Fredericksburg is responsible for cleaning that station. I will speak with them about improving the conditions there. As for the No Smoking signs, with the station being in an historic district, it is more difficult to have additional signage put up. I'll check to see if there is something we can do.

Mark from Catlette, VA asks:

When if ever will the VRE expand into Fauquier County? I have heard that the VRE wants Fauquier County to pay for an expansion at Broadrun station. However, if the PTRC would expand into Fauquier County then there would not be a need to expand the parking Broadrun Station because the commuters who live further out would use the parking on Catlette or Bealton. Why doesn't the PTRC and the Fauquier County BOS get together and compromise? It would be better for everyone.

VRE Management:

We can not expand into Fauquier until Fauquier joins the "VRE family." Up until now, they have decided not to join.

Second, the VRE Operations Board has expansion to Gainesville/Haymarket as the number one priority because that expansion meets the greater need.

Liz from Broad Run VA asks:

Today I noticed a crowd almost double the size for the train that left BR at 0640. By the time we got to the Burke stops people were standing. Understanding that increases in ridership happen in Sep and Jan- and understanding the trend of more people commuting from the suburbs, how does the VRE intend to manage this in the near term?

VRE Management:

It is always difficult to tell where the "bumps" in ridership will occur. Once we have a couple of weeks of September under our belts, I plan to revisit the train assignments and make adjustments as necessary.

Marc from Fredericksburg asks:

What happened about two weeks ago when the train ran out of water? Why was this not checked before it left the yard in the morning? This was irresponsible and showed a lack of professionalism on the part of the VRE and Amtrak. The individual(s) responsible should receive some sort of reprimand. What is being done so this problem does not happen again?

VRE Management:

In the last month, we had two trains with water issues. The first had a power assembly that cracked during the trip. This could not have been prevented.

The second, was the result of a slow leak that should have been fixed more quickly. I have spoken with Amtrak management (who performs our maintenance) and I have been assured it will not happen again.

Eddie from Fredericksburg asks:

Can you give an update on the procurement process for the new locomotives? And also when will we see some of the newer locomotives in serviced that are going to be leased in the meantime?

VRE Management:

We have requests for proposals out, with proposals due by the end of October. I anticipate that we will have a contract by January, 2008. The contract will provide for the procurement of 20 locomotives with delivery starting within 18-24 months.

In the meantime, we have signed a lease for three locomotives. I anticipate that they will be available for service in December.

Esther from Fredericksburg asks:

VRE service decisions always seem slanted towards the government employee -- i.e. discontinued service on federal holidays. Although you always say you want to be fair to the passenger -- what is fair about non-federal employees having to spend \$20 extra for step-up tickets in order to get to work when VRE provides no service?

VRE Management:

I know it may seem that our service is slanted towards government workers, but I have to keep my budget in mind. When we ran limited service on holidays, we had to pay for the operations of trains that were nearly empty. With the additional state funding we will be receiving, I will look into whether we can return the limited schedule on holidays.

Higgins from Burke,VA asks:

Why don't we see VRE having "meet the management" during the summer and winter months? The perception is

VRE staff are too sensitive to extreme temperatures, or in fact just plain lazy. Some of us pay \$200 a month for what we see as a overstuffed VRE. Please provide some feedback on this issue as there seems to be a vicious rumor spreading.

VRE Management:

I am very sensitive to the perception of our organization. In fact, we had many riders comment last year that the Meet the Management series did not occur during the summer when delays were at their worst. I changed the schedule to run straight through the summer. Now instead of running through the fall, they ended in August.

As for my staff in general, VRE employs 35 people to operate 30 trains with a daily total of over 15,000 riders. This includes finance, administration, customer service, planning, construction, and many other duties. I have staff in the office as early as 4:30 in the morning and as late as 8:00pm or whenever the last train arrives at its final destination. We do quite a bit for the small number of staff that we have. That doesn't sound lazy to me.

VRE Management:

Well, we went a little long today. Plus we had a few technical issues that slowed us up.

You are aware, as I am aware, that ridership is going up and we are seeing crowding on certain trains. As mentioned earlier, I will be reviewing the train consists and making adjustments as necessary to better accomodate everyone.

You had a lot of great questions! I look forward to answering more of them next month. It likes October 3rd will be our next time together.

Dale

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