

Virginia Railway Express

Let's Talk!

The next VRE online forum will start on Thursday, December 11th at 12 noon.



There are currently 85 questions waiting to be answered.

VRE Management:

Thank you for joining me on this rainy day. I hope that everyone had a good Thanksgiving. I also appreciate you bearing with my schedule, since we had to postpone our chat until today. Now, on to the questions!

Todd from Bristow asks:

Last month, the Manassas line had a day where my train took an hour to get from Burke to Rolling Road due to "leaf oil." While I recognise the impact of leaf oil, what we also heard was that a device that should drop grit/sand to improve traction failed, making the situation much worse. What steps is VRE taking to improve maintenance before we face icy tracks? Those 3 hour delays are killer.

VRE Management:

We would rather have ice than leaf oil! Ice and snow is easily crushed and melted by moving trains and water by itself will not cause wheel slip. Leaf oil, however, lubricates the rail and significantly reduces traction between it and train wheels. This oil affects all rail systems that operate in wooded areas across the world. For a regional example, Baltimore shut down its light rail for a week this past fall due to wheel slip flattening its equipments wheels. They had to reshape the wheels before they could operate again.

Mac from Aden VA asks:

Generally I love VRE but I really wish you would consider either pushing the mid-day train back or adding a train between 1:15 and 3:45 on the southbound Manassas line. The current mid-day train leaves Union Station at 1:15 and arrives at Broad Run (in theory) at 2:28. I would think that there would be a lot of riders, especially going in on the earlier trains, that can't justify leaving work so early mid-day but would like to get on the road to home before 5:00 (generally the next earliest option) especially considering most of us have some sort of commute from the train station. Thanks.

VRE Management:

There are two major obstacles. First, our current contract with CSX specifies a time window in which our trains can operate. Second, we are not in a financial position to add further service.

Scott from Bristow, VA asks:

You stated in a previous chat that you were looking the rules concerning bringing bikes on the trains. Specifically, the only types allowed are folding bikes. Will there be a time we can bring a regular bike on board the train. I work 30 minutes from a VRE station and it would be a great help if I could bring my bike onto the train like I can on the Metro. Thank you.

VRE Management:

I am currently reviewing options regarding the bike policy. Will keep you posted.

JOE from FREDERICKSBURG asks:

Well you know it would be better for me and my fellow riders if the riders already on the train would not try to SAVE the seat next to them their boyfriend or girlfriend getting in two stops. No conductor in site to hear or witness this. What is one to do?

VRE Management:

I am working with the conductors to discourage the practice of seat saving. We also stress in our courtesy campaign for riders not to do this. We will continue to get the word out.

Carolyn from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

Will VRE offer an express train service (one) in the early morning from Frbg to L'enfant on a daily basis? I think there is interest in this and L't connects to all metro lines.

VRE Management:

We have plans to offer express service similar to your plan. However, financial constraints prevent us from following through.

Rob from Fredericksburg asks:

VRE is such a fantastic service. Even when we are delayed, I can relax, have access to a bathroom and can close my eyes. Some of your longer riders must have forgotten what traffic jams on 95 feel like. GOOD JOB VRE!!!!

VRE Management:

Thank you for the compliments, we are glad to offer our trains as an alternative. Even though you think well of our service, our team always strives to make it better.

CJ from nokeville va asks:

For over a month I've been listening to various radio stations to VRE advertisements about the NEW VRE cars? Where are they? I have not seen any new cars?

VRE Management:

There are new cars all of the trainsets except two. Currently they are on 304/301/309 and 324/335. In about two years we will receive the new cars purchased to replace the Kawasaki cars recently sold to Maryland and all trainsets will have the new Gallery cars.

Michele from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

Will our December monthly tickets be valid on January 2nd?

VRE Management:

Yes, the grace period on monthly tickets is the first service day of the following month.

Elaine from Arlington asks:

Will I be able to take VRE on Inauguration day or will the train be so full of charter bus passengers that I will not be able to get on in Alexandria? I buy a monthly ticket and pay taxes that help support the VRE & the prospect that I will not be able to take the VRE on inauguration day because the VRE is catering to out-of-towners who will likely use the VRE only on that one day is very upsetting. Your VRE passengers should be your first concern. And don't tell the Metro option is available!

VRE Management:

We were not originally planning to run service on Inauguration Day as it is a special government holiday and most workers who take our trains regularly will be off. Due to the overwhelming interest in running that day, we decided to run special service for the extra people that will be in town for the event. However, because this is special service, special reserved tickets will be sold. Regular VRE tickets will not be accepted. The schedule and procedures for riding that day will be posted on our web site tomorrow.

Arthur from Burke asks:

Here's the compelling question of the season: I see you have no service the day after Christmas. No word has come down that the government will be closed that day. Do you have reason to think the government will close on Dec. 26?

VRE Management:

We reviewed past ridership on Dec 26 when it falls on a Friday and it has been abysmally low. While it has not been officially designated as a day off for the government, most people take off anyway and not running service on that day helps us balance our budget.

Mike from Spotsy, VA asks:

Two questions: VRE is hurting for \$. But you managed to buy and install the most useless flat panel TV system ever deployed. Why not run the news or something? Where'd you get the \$ for this? And from the 21st century to the 19th, when can we expect you to ditch the prison train, i.e. the old rail cars? Since certain people prefer them, why not spread them around instead of sticking an entire miserable set on one route?

VRE Management:

Our old "ticker tape" system was increasingly difficult to find parts for due to its age. The new system was funded from federal grants specifically marked for sign improvement purposes. Additionally it helps us adhere to ADA policies requiring both audio and visual information at our stations. We are looking into being able to provide different information with the program that displays train information but this has to be customized to be compatible. About the older Gallery cars, they have compatibility issues with the newer ones, so it is best to keep them together rather than spread them around.

Bill from Stafford, VA asks:

Will full service be offered on Inauguration Day?

VRE Management:

Yes, the schedule will be posted on our web site -- along with other details about our special service for that day. However, I can tell you now that it is a special service and regular VRE tickets will not be accepted on January 20th.

Ray from Manassas asks:

On Dec 3rd, train 324 operated with the engine at the lead of the consist, opposite from the quiet car. Best train nap I've had in 2 years on VRE! Since you should be able to configure the consist however you decide, I've always wondered why you place the noisiest component (the engine) immediately adjacent to the quiet car.

VRE Management:

Before our new cars came into service, the only cars with bathrooms were the cab cars (the northern most car). We figured the quiet car wouldn't be so quiet with people shuffling in and out all the time to use the restroom, so we designated the next most recognizable car, the one next to the engine.

Nick from F-Burg asks:

Dale, so what is VRE going to do with all of the extra money from gas prices being so low? Riders are expecting not only extremely reliable service, but some other types of perks for paying so much with gas prices so low.

VRE Management:

Fuel represents about 8% of total budget. While fuel prices are dropping, other expenses continue to increase. First, I have spent a considerable amount of money on our locomotive maintenance and hope you noticed the reduction in engine-related delays. Second, insurance for transit providers has increased significantly.

Mark from Fredericksburg asks:

Are there any capitol improvement projects ready to go; just awaiting for funding. Seems like VRE should be a beneficiary of Obama's desire to fund infrastructure.

VRE Management:

We have purchased five locomotives and have an option for fifteen more. I have submitted the option for fifteen locomotives (worth \$61 million) as a project under President-Elect Obama's plan.

Late but safe from Burke asks:

Earlier this week, train 331 was delayed just short of Burke Center because of some cylinders lying on or near the tracks. After about a 15 minute delay, we arrived at Burke Center to find several Fairfax County cops lining the platform. First of all, kudos to VRE for keeping us safe, secondly, what happened?

VRE Management:

This was an unfortunate delay. It was caused by vandals removing fire extinguishers from the new Burke Centre garage and throwing them onto the railroad right-of-way. Our crews did the right thing by notifying the proper authorities and Fairfax County Police responded quickly. Fairfax is working with Norfolk Southern police to prevent future incidents.

Carl from Lorton VA asks:

The background of our tickets show a legacy consist. To my knowledge we have no more single level cars - we're a Gallery fleet. How about updated artwork for the next blank ticket order showing the glorious Gallery cars? As long as it doesn't cost more, of course. p.s. Thanks for your work providing commuters affordable and reliable transportation.

VRE Management:

Good suggestion. We are looking into revamping our tickets and will keep this in mind.

Rebecca from Nokesville asks:

Since the price of gas has dropped tremendously, and there has been no announced rollback of the 7% hike in January (which really still HURTS), what is VRE going to do with the extra money that it is banking? Really hope you're going to save it and not spend it on anything frivolous. Yes, expenditures are rising, but still stunned at a 7% mid-year increase. Use our precious extra dollars well.

VRE Management:

I know better than to spend money on anything frivolous during this economic climate, or any other time for that matter. Oil prices have dropped this past quarter, but this does not offset the previous years (last one especially) of steadily rising diesel costs. Also, other costs such as labor and maintenance continue to rise and our jurisdictions cannot increase their funding to support those increases.

Bill from Fredericksburg asks:

Almost every day for nearly a month speed restrictions have been in effect. Is temporary now permanent? The talk among riders about missed appointments, child care issues, etc, was getting louder. Yet, not a word from your staff. No why, how long, do we need to make alternative arrangements. You pride yourselves on communication...you let us down this time.

VRE Management:

Equipment designed to detect defects in the tracks found many possible ones in our service area the week before Thanksgiving. This puts those areas around the defects under slow orders until the issue is addressed, for safety reasons. CSX is doing the best job to determine and fix these flaws with the tracks. While the major ones have been fixed, some still remain. Hopefully, you have noticed an improvement this week.

Chokin' from Fredericksburg asks:

Lately, when I have been train #300 in Fredericksburg (I sit in the cab car) it smells like someone is smoking a cigar. I can smell it coming through the air-handling system. Since I doubt a passenger would be bold enough to do this, I'm wondering if someone of the crew could be doing it. Please look into this.

VRE Management:

Smoking is not allowed onboard by either passengers or crew. I will talk to Amtrak about this.

Ryan from Quantico asks:

Dale, I must say I find it unfair how many days are going to be S scheduled. I'm still paying the full monthly ticket price. Why should my fair stay the same if your service doesn't remain the same?

VRE Management:

As part of balancing the budget, we had several choices to make. In an effort to minimize the fair increase, I looked at other cost-saving measures. One of those measures was to decrease service when ridership has been traditionally the lowest. During the week between Christmas and New Year's, roughly 50% of our regular riders do not use our trains. As a result, we will operate 55% of our service during this period.

Bob from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

I just read your response about special trains on Inauguration day, so I guess the people that actually use and pay for the trains are just simply no better than the freight that CSX moves. Great JOD VRE!!!!!!

VRE Management:

I know that some of our regular riders are not happy with the decision to operate on January 20 with special fares. However, this is a special day and we did not originally intend to operate at all.

I am concerned that without special fares and procedures, we can not accommodate all those who would like to ride our trains that day. In addition, the costs for security and other special staffing is significant.

Based on the number of calls from those not living in our service area, there is a high demand for our service and we want to make sure that we are not overrun.

Fred from Stafford, VA asks:

I just read your response about the 26th of December, must everything be about you and your budget? Are you not a service for which taxes are paid and monthly fees (read contract) paid? Don't you think you should provide the service which people pay for or should you simply admit the service can not be provided by your staff and move on.

VRE Management:

Fred, my reasons for this change are similar those expressed to Ryan from Quantico. The only difference is when December 26 is a Friday, we normally carry only 5% of our ridership.

Joe from Fredericksburg asks:

How did the Toys For Tots drive go yesterday?

VRE Management:

We received about a third less toys and twenty percent less donations than last year.

John from Linton Hall, VA asks:

I just saw my city is the worst for commuting. A Parking expansion, an express train and better roads to and from broad run station would help the situation.

VRE Management:

The idea of having a parking garage at Broad Run is being kicked around. Better access to the station may be considered if it happens. Our budget will not allow an express train. While we try to improve our system of travel, a comprehensive plan to improve all transportation systems in the region would best alleviate congestion seen in this area.

George from Woodbridge, VA asks:

What percentage of VRE riders commute to Alexandria compared to Crystal City, L'enfant, and Union Station?
5%?

VRE Management:

According to our survey conducted last May, 12% detrain at Alexandria. Compared to 28%, 38%, and 20% respectively.

Josh from **Manassas, VA** asks:

What's the latest on the Lynchburg Amtrak project

VRE Management:

We are still working with the state. The final schedule will probably go to the January board for approval. I'll keep you updated.

Alex from **Rippon** asks:

Hey Dale! President Elect Obama said he wants to put a detailed version of the budget on the web for all to see. Would you be willing to do that for us? Thanks for the consideration!

VRE Management:

I will be happy to post the budget for Fiscal Year 2010, once it has been approved by our Operations Board and commissions, probably in mid-January. In the meanwhile, our audited financial statements for the last several years are currently available on our web site.

Randy from **Bristow VA** asks:

I understand that Richmond is not happy with the gas taxes they are receiving because of the recent decrease of gas prices. I have heard that Richmond wants to cut VRE assistance. Will new railcars or engines be affected as far as the new cuts? How many new cars do we have now and how many will we have this time next year?

VRE Management:

VRE receives operating funds from the Commonwealth. Currently, I estimate that we will receive about \$1 million less for the next fiscal year. This is another reason why we are increasing fares even though gas prices are down.

The purchase of locomotives is not affected by operating income. We currently have 61 new cars, with 10 more beginning to arrive in February 2010.

dkk from **WarrentonVA** asks:

Love your new cars. Love the big new bathrooms in the new cars. Do NOT love the way the bathroom doors operate -- need strength and muscle that my arthritic hands simply do not have. I don't use the bathrooms because I'm afraid I'll get in and be unable to open the door to get out. Kicking at the door to have someone on the outside open for me would be too embarrassing. Please could you look at fixing the doors so that they operate more easily?

VRE Management:

I'll look into seeing if we can adjust the doors.

Karen from **Manassas** asks:

I appreciate your budget issues and think you are doing the best possible planning under the economic circumstances. I am disappointed that so many of my fellow riders are fixated on "unjustices" being done to them because you are making sound business decisions by not operating on a day when almost no one rides (Dec 26), and offering special event tickets when no one will be using VRE for anything but the special event. Keep up the good work!

VRE Management:

I always like ending on a happy note! I'll be sure to pass along your appreciation to our budget and accounting staff.

VRE Management:

Well, time's up! Have a great Holiday Season! See you next year (January 7th).
Dale

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