

# Virginia Railway Express

## Let's Talk!

The next VRE online forum will start on Wednesday, February 6th at 12 noon.



There are currently 91 questions waiting to be answered.

### **VRE Management:**

Thanks for joining me! If you haven't noticed, we put five new Gallery coaches on the train set that operates as Fredericksburg 301/304/309 yesterday.

We have received 10 of our 50 optioned cars and will receive five more each month until October 2008.

Now, on with the questions.

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### **Joan from Spotsylvania asks:**

Is there any news on the horizon that an earlier train will leave Fredericksburg in the morning. I am hoping that it will be soon. The 5:15 am departure gets me to Union Station at 6:45 am and sometimes later if there is a problem. My shift at work begins at 7:00 am and my 30 minute walk gets me to work late.

### **VRE Management:**

The board has been briefed on adding an earlier train on the Fredericksburg line. It can only occur if two things happen:

First, we need some additional money from the Northern Virginia Regional Transportation Authority. We should know if we are getting that money by the end of this month. Second, CSX must permit us to add the train to our schedule. I will ask them once we know we can afford it.

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

On Train #307 the quiet car doesn't have any labels to indicate it's a quiet car. What happened to it? Conductors are constantly announcing it's a quiet car

### **VRE Management:**

Staff tells me that we have used up all of our Quiet car signs. New ones are being made. We hope to have them ready by the end of this month.

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### **Kim from Fredericksburg asks:**

With ridership up, on-time performance for trains #300 and #307 has decreased significantly. Any plans to address this issue?

### **VRE Management:**

I know that there have been some recent problems with these heavily used trains. We are keeping an eye on them and will see what we can do if problems continue.

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### **Jennifer Powell from Midlothian Virginia asks:**

Why is there only one bathroom on the VRE train (5:15 a.m. train out of Fredericksburg) and you have between 250 - 500 passengers riding per day? This week (Jan 28- 31) the Broadcasting System that announces the stops is not working? Why is it taking a long time to get fixed? Many passengers has been complaining about missing

their stops, because at night you do not know which stop the train is stopping at. This problem is also on train 5:15 a.m. from Fredericksburg. All the money that is collected from riding the trains, we should not have all the problems that are going on.

**VRE Management:**

Our Director of Rail and Equipment Services tells me that one of the cars with a rest room was removed for maintenance last week. But, the second car with a restroom has returned and there should be a rest room at end of the train.

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**Yolanda from Burke Center** asks:

When will the stacked parking garage be available? I can't count the number of times I've searched for a spot, couldn't find one, missed the train, drive to the shuttle bus stop and catch the next train. Thanks in advance for your response. Y

**VRE Management:**

I anticipate the garage to be completed in the May/June time frame. This should alleviate the parking issues at Burke Centre.

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**Debbie from Fredericksburg** asks:

I've got to ask: Why is it that Manassa line gets all the new cars before the Fredericksburg line? We pay the same amount as Manassa does and we get treated as red headed step children.

**VRE Management:**

Five cars went on the Fredericksburg line yesterday. All new cars start on the Manassas line because we have the mechanical and warranty personnel assigned to the Broad Run yard. We will run all new cars approximately one month before they are assigned to the Fredericksburg.

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**Sarge from Manassas, Va** asks:

Lately there have been a lot of delays on VRE due to locomotive mechanical problems. When can we expect to see the new leased locomotives? The new cars being deployed are useless when the locomotives continue to break down.

**VRE Management:**

The first of three leased locomotives should go into service by the end of this month. I expect the other two to be added by the end of March.

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**Nancy from Manassas, VA** asks:

The Kawasaki cars have a scrolling LED that gives "next stop" information, though other older gallery cars do not. I have been on one of the newest cars once. Most of the time, the speakers on the older gallery cars work, with an occasional glitch when they don't. Is there anything that can be done to ensure that announcements come through clearly regularly on a regular basis? Why do the newer gallery cars not have the LED message boards?

**VRE Management:**

I know that station stop announcements are important. Our mechanical crews are working to keep the PA system in good shape on the older cars. If you notice a problem for more than one day, let us know by noting the number of the railcar and submitting a Train Information form (<http://www.vre.org/feedback/mechanicalconcerns.php>).

The newest railcars are also equipped with LED signs over the interior doors and announcements indicating station stops.

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**DK from Warrenton** asks:

Manassas Traing #324 is remarkably on time (yay VRE!) EXCEPT for when we are stopped and held outside of Alexandria, waiting for (the late) Fredricksburg #300 to go by. The holds, which can be from a couple of minutes to as much as 15 minutes, are increasing of late. By holding us, TWO trains are now late instead of just one. Why

can't #324 be allowed to continue on its on-time schedule and let #300 - already late - get behind it?

**VRE Management:**

Holding #324 for other traffic as it enters CSX tracks south of Alexandria is a dispatching decision made by CSX. I will keep an eye on it and work with CSX if it becomes a regular event.

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**Woody from Manassas** asks:

Why hasn't the Calendar of Events link on your web page been updated with a 2008 calendar?

<http://www.vre.org/service/calendar.html>

**VRE Management:**

Thanks for reminding me. I'll make it's updated.

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**Dale from Alexandria, VA** asks:

Hopefully this question is answered; as it addresses VRE's policies and procedures. I would like to know why VRE implements a "courtesy campaign" when it can't enforce it? I've been riding VRE for over 6 years now; and I've never seen a conductor ask someone to stop applying make-up, remove their feet from the upper level gallery cars or keep a low profile on their cell phones. What is the purpose of having this policy, if VRE can't enforce it? Everyone knows your conductors are contracted through Amtrak, not VRE. It is almost virtually impossible to enforce your so called policies. Response?

**VRE Management:**

While we can't force people to be kind/respectful to one another, we can remind them to be considerate of their fellow riders.

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**Steven from Burke, VA** asks:

Will some of the new cars be used for the quiet cars? It seems that the new cars are always at the opposite end of the train (front morning/rear evening) and with the quiet car always connected to the locomotive. Those of us who like to read and not talk seem to be penalized. I've noticed this trend on the trains I usually catch (322 & 324 and 329 & 331). Thank you for your response.

**VRE Management:**

Yes. The first new cars we received were cab cars which are used to remotely operate the locomotives as the train goes north to Union Station. These cars have to be placed on the north end of our trains. Now that we are getting new coaches, they will be used throughout train sets.

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**John from Manassas** asks:

I'm using the new service from commuter store to use smartbenefit/smartcard for my monthly pass. It was not easy to set up but so far I love it. Also, not very transparent (don't know if its working until the ticket shows up). How long is the free shipping going to last?

**VRE Management:**

Thanks for letting me know. We are working to make the sign-up even easier. I anticipate that the free mailing will continue for some time.

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**Woody from Manassas** asks:

The other day I was waiting for a Fredricksburg train (#307) to load up & depart when I noticed that there were two gallery cars off the front of the platform. I also noticed that the rest of the train was fully loaded with the conductor standing at the end of train checking his watch and waiting for the passengers at the front of the platform to complete loading. It seems to me that if the train were to stop so that there was a single gallery car off the platform at either end of the train, then the passenger dwell time for train 307 at Crystal City could be decreased by up to 30%.

**VRE Management:**

For the longer trains and the shorter platforms, we are trying different ways to stop the train at the platform. I like your idea of having cars at each end off the platform. We are trying it on Manassas 331 now.

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**Diane from Rippon** asks:

I've noticed that when there are delays and problems with the trains, the Daily Download info then often lists the mechanical/other issue but also lists "longer than usual station dwell times" as a factor. This doesn't seem fair when, of course, it will take longer for passengers to embark/detrain when there are two trains-worth of folks trying to board a late train! Seems that you're blaming passengers when, in actuality, this is all a result of the initial problem/delay. Why add insult to injury? Thanks!

**VRE Management:**

Delay reasons are not meant to blame, but to explain. Train stops are scheduled for two minutes. So, when it takes longer at several stops, this affects on-time performance.

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**Gregory from Manassas, VA** asks:

The "Life on the Train" broadcast is very annoying and I wish you could discontinue it. It is an unnecessary disruption of the peace and quiet of a morning commute, normally to tell us something that everyone already knows (e.g., leave "priority seating" to folks who need it), or that could be best left to conductor announcements. I know you're trying to think of new and innovative ways to encourage courtesy, but this is not a good way. The daily commute has enough annoyances already. Why add to them?

**VRE Management:**

I am sorry you don't like the "Life on the Train" announcements. Others have found them entertaining.

The bottom line is you can't legislate courtesy.

We have a number of complaints from passengers about the behavior of their fellow riders. We have asked the conductors to help, but there is no way two conductors have time to police a 700 person train.

The announcements are part of a three part campaign including posters and newsletter articles to focus rider attention on the problem.

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**Bart from Fredericksburg** asks:

What do you do with the cars and locomotives that you take out of service?

**VRE Management:**

About 25 of the older cars will be sold. The rest will be kept to use as temporary replacements when cars are removed for maintenance. We will also hang on to the older fleet to use when we are in a position to add more trains.

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**Choking on Fumes** from **Fredericksburg** asks:

Is it no longer policy to turn off the HVAC systems when going through the Union Station tunnel? The conductors have not been turning off the HVACs on 305 for at least the past month. It is just a matter of time before someone with asthma or some other respiratory disorder begins to have problems breathing, and the VRE is going to end up on the wrong end of a lawsuit.

**VRE Management:**

Unfortunately, some of the older gallery cars (like the set on #305) are built so that the vents do not completely close. As a result, we ask the crews to stop the fans before the train enters the tunnel. I'll check with Amtrak to make sure that the crew is doing this.

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**VRE Management:**

We have received a number of questions and comments about a proposed fare increase for next year.

I know that fare increases are undesirable by our riders. But, they are necessary to maintain VRE's viability.

We have scheduled public hearings about the fare increase and possible indexing of the fares.

I can not over stress the importance of making your comments and concerns known at the hearings, or by emails and letters.

Your comments are briefed to the board which takes them into consideration before making any decisions. In the

past, we have made significant changes based on your comments.

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**Leah** from **Manassas, VA** asks:

The horns on the gallery cars sound like a strangled rooster. Can you put on new horns that sound pleasant, like those that were on the Mafersa cars?

**VRE Management:**

Sorry you don't like the horns on some of the gallery cars. But, we don't plan on modifying them.

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**JB** from **Bealeton** asks:

I had surgery on my foot this month and the step down at Crystal City is bit much. Can we get the conductor to put down the little yellow step off the quite car in the morning?

**VRE Management:**

Please see a conductor and let them know. They will take care of you.

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**Darleen** from **Broad Run** asks:

No question - just a BIG THANK YOU for the wind breaks at L'enfant Station! :o)

**VRE Management:**

You're welcome.

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**Phil** from **Annandale** asks:

A big, big THANK YOU for getting our wind breakers erected, just as you stated in the November Forum. I've already used them a couple of times and they do make a big difference!!!

**VRE Management:**

You're welcome. Glad it's helping.

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from asks:

Fredericksburg 301/304/309 new cars really need some tweaking. No PA, No digital strip read, and probably cooling system errors as well. These should be fixed - is having duo cab cars the problem?

**VRE Management:**

I'll have this looked at. All of those systems should be working.

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**Joseph** from **Stafford,VA** asks:

Why is eating and drinking allowed on VRE trains?

**VRE Management:**

We've always permitted eating and drinking on our trains. Since many of our passengers are on board for over an hour, we look at this as a benefit that many other transit providers do not allow.

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**Ed** from **Fredericksburg** asks:

First I would like to say that I ride 309 home, and I really like the new cars. They are a great addition to VRE.

Second, on time performance still seems to be suffering, with 85% for Dec and 81% for Jan on the Fred line. This is still short of the 90% that the "Partners in Performance" program was supposed to achieve. Are there still more obstacles to overcome to achieve 90% consistently?

**VRE Management:**

Our goal is still 90%. CSX, Amtrak and VRE are working hard to achieve it. It may take us a little while, but we will get there.

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**B** from **Manassas** asks:

When can we finally say goodbye to those Sounder/Bombardier trains? They no longer provide a pleasant experience, especially when the train is very crowded.

**VRE Management:**

The last Sounder set was removed from service last Friday.

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**Hammer** from **Frednecksburg** asks:

Is it me, or am I the only one that notices the bone jarring bump that southbound Fred trains experience right before the Woodbridge bridge ?? I always tense up right before this section for fear of a second derailment.

**VRE Management:**

I'll have CSX inspect the track in that area.

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**Matthew Roche** from **Burke, VA** asks:

Has there ever been any consideration to running one train in and out of the city on an express run. Simply put, it would run from first station to the last with no stops. It would only be one train each way. This could potentially draw more people to the train because it would be a fast way in and out, thus drawing more riders. I have also thought of a cost cutting measure, don't print out the newsletter, send it out electronically and post it to the web site. This could cut costs and trees! To stay competitive and increase service we have got to keep VRE affordable.

**VRE Management:**

Thanks for the suggestions. I think that "express" trains are a good idea and when the money and additional equipment becomes available, I'll look into this as an option for additional service.

Advertising in the VRE Update covers the cost of producing the paper version of the newsletter. Since many of our riders still prefer the paper version, we are continuing to offer it on the train.

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**Chris** from **Manassas, VA** asks:

I have a two part question: 1) When the parking garage at Manassas opens, will we have to pay to park? 2) Will we still be able to park in the current commuter lot when the new garage opens? Thanks.

**VRE Management:**

There will be no parking charge, but you will need the permit from the City. The current lots will remain open after the construction.

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**Joe** from **Manassas, VA** asks:

Is VRE aware the monitors on the far platform in Manassas City are NOT working? They are on, the green light is lit, but nothing appears on the screen.

**VRE Management:**

I know that we have been having some communications problems at certain stations lately. We are working on these issues. I'll make sure that staff is informed about Manassas.

If you continue to notice a problem next week, please let us know by submitting a Station Information form (<http://www.vre.org/feedback/stationconcerns.php>).

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**Marie** from **Manassas Park, VA** asks:

To Gregory from Manassas: I think the "Life on the Train" announcements are amusing. :) If folks would listen and follow the instructions they wouldn't be as necessary, so instead of being annoyed at the announcements, folks should be annoyed at the CAUSE for them - rude & inconsiderate passengers.

**VRE Management:**

Here's the other view.

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**VRE Management:**

Time's up already!

I tried to answer as many questions as I could.

If you have comments regarding the proposed fare increase, I hope to see you at one the hearings.

Our next forum will be March 5th.

"See" you then.

Dale

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