

# Virginia Railway Express

## Let's Talk!

The next VRE online forum will start on Wednesday, June 4th at 12 noon.



There are currently 81 questions waiting to be answered.

### **VRE Management:**

Hello again! It appears that everyone survived the May 30 service disruption. By all accounts, it went well. The improved capacity that this project brings will greatly benefit VRE.

Now that we are into June, everyone is looking forward to summer. In two weeks, CSX dispatchers will move from Jacksonville to Halethorpe, MD (southwest of Baltimore). This a great opportunity for us since the dispatchers will be able to gain more in depth knowledge of the territory that they dispatch.

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### **VRE Management:**

Later this month, the General Assembly will meet in a special session to determine how to reinstate the funding that many of the state's transportation services were counting on in the upcoming year. For VRE, that funding meant \$25 million a year. The Virginia State Supreme Court declared the funding mechanism that passed in the spring of 2007 as unconstitutional. If you have an opinion on this matter and how it affects VRE, be sure to let your state legislators know.

Enough from my soap box, let's start answering some questions.

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### **Markus from Fredericksburg, VA asks:**

Is there anything being done to reduce or get rid of the cabin noise... It is at times unbearable and disconcerting to here what sounds like structural binding noises... This is not on just one car but many as I catch different trains each day... Thanks, Markus

### **VRE Management:**

Our equipment is inspected to meet and exceed all federal and state regulations governing rail passenger service. I'll have our Mechanical Department to evaluate the noise and if necessary, make repairs to any potential problems with the equipment.

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### **Scott from Stafford asks:**

What's with the on-time performance recently? Believe it or not I stopped riding the VRE daily (TLC Ticket) because I couldn't count on being where I needed to be on time. I would rather drive and pay the \$4 gas than be late and loose my job. This and a limited schedule (see MARC) are the reasons why the VRE is not as successful as it should be. I very much want to ride... please help.

### **VRE Management:**

In May, there were flood restrictions and CSX projects to improve the railroad. While these are temporary restrictions, in the long run, it will improve our performance.

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### **Larry from Fredericksburg asks:**

Are there any more new cars set to join the fleet in the near future? If so, which train/line? Thanks, Larry

### **VRE Management:**

The next set of new Gallery cars will be put on 328/331 on the Manassas Line. While the whole set will not be new, a majority of them will be.

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**Brian from Bealeton** asks:

I ride the 325 from Crystal City to Broadrun Station. I am an 80% disabled veteran. There are many days that I would like to sit in the Handicap - Priority Seating. Yet there is a group of riders that fill the seats up everyday so that they can be the first riders off the train. It is embarrassing to ask them to move because I don't look handicapped, so I end up pushing myself to the back of the car and taking a regular seat. Could please tell them that NON-Senior / Handicapped persons should not sit in priority seating except when there are no other seats available. Thank you in advance.

**VRE Management:**

I'll have our Customer Communications department reinforce where priority seating is and be courteous to our handicapped riders. In the meanwhile, please talk with your conductor so they can help you find a seat.

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**Amrita Hill from Fairfax, VA** asks:

Can you add one late night service, for example around 8 or 9 pm? A lot more riders would take the train if they had one later train to count on. How about a low frequency weekend service, there are plenty of events/activities in Washington?

**VRE Management:**

Additional funding for VRE from the state is in limbo right now. We planned to use that money for more service, though not on the weekends, and new locomotives. Until the fate of that money is decided, we have to push these plans back until we figure how to finance these initiatives.

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**Greg from Fredericksburg, VA** asks:

I have submitted requests for FRC that were not handed out on the train that was 1 1/2 hours late plus submitted a request to get 3 rides when the ticket machine malfunctioned and only validated 7 trips on a ten trip ticket. VRE has never provided an answer or replaced the ticket. What gives?

**VRE Management:**

Please send an email to [gotrains@vre.org](mailto:gotrains@vre.org) or call our office at 703-684-1001 so our staff can better assist you.

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**Don from Manassas, VA** asks:

I was just wondering how many people took the train on May 30 compared to usual ridership? I know I passed up the opportunity.

**VRE Management:**

A little bit more than half of the usual ridership on a Friday.

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**John from Manassas, VA** asks:

Are (permanent) repairs going to be made to the spalling non-skid stair step treads at the Manassas Park station (steps up to the southern shelter where the 2 ticket machines are located)? The epoxy fix has deteriorated and additional concrete has spalled making some of the strips loose and the step surfaces uneven.

**VRE Management:**

I'll have our Facilities Manager look at the situation.

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**Angie from Manassas, VA** asks:

I know that train schedules can be difficult to manage, but can anything be done to adjust the time for northbound train 338? Train 333 has to wait 5-10 minutes at least once a week for 338 to pass. It happened again last night and we ran 15 minutes late the rest of the trip. It's very frustrating to sit in a full train waiting for a nearly empty one to pass by.

**VRE Management:**

While this does occasionally happen, last night Train 333 was mainly held for a Norfolk Southern freight train and 338 as well. We will continue to keep an eye on it -- especially as we look at revising our schedules this fall.

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**Esther from Fredericksburg asks:**

Why are a majority of the new, more comfortable cars on the Manassas line, which is a substantially shorter ride than Fredericksburg?

**VRE Management:**

Actually, as of right now, the consist plan has three new Gallery train sets on each line. It may seem the Manassas Line has more trains with new Gallery cars because that line has more "turn" trains. I am trying to maintain a balance so neither line is favored.

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**Tammy from Springfield, VA asks:**

Let me first say that riding VRE is a pleasure. I also like the new cars, but wish they had more seats. Last night's Manassas train was the most crowded I have ever seen it. People were sitting on the stairs and standing in the aisles. I realize funding is a problem, but are there any plans to add more cars to the existing trains? With gas prices skyrocketing, it's only to get more crowded.

**VRE Management:**

No definite plans, but we always monitor ridership and will adjust consists accordingly.

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**Kelly from Fredericksburg asks:**

Delays, malfunctions, even rude people, I can deal with. You guys do an outstanding job! But can you PLEASE tell me why I am standing 90% of the time when I ride 303 or 305 from Alex. in the afternoon? If you're not one of the first people through the doors you can count on not getting a seat. This has been the case for the past 4-5 weeks. I understand with gas prices and VRE advertising that ridership has increased. Why then have you not added more cars? I often hear the conductors asking each other if there are any seats because their areas are over flowing. With prices increasing next month it's getting harder to accept these circumstances.

**VRE Management:**

Unfortunately, we are limited on our mid-day storage space north of Union Station. However, we are looking at ways to increase the length of our trains. Our options are very limited, though.

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**Janine from Fredericksburg asks:**

Thanks for a great service, especially as gas prices continue to climb. As the price for commuting will rise at least 50% this year for most in our area due to rising gas cost, VRE riders will see only a 3% increase in commuting cost. I notice ridership continues to increase which is great and will helpfully bring in more income as we fill the trains to capacity. I notice that more and more people are standing as the cars are crowded. It would help if the conductors continue to announce, after we leave each stop, that there are seats in available and the car in which they are open.

**VRE Management:**

I will communicate to our crews the need for this as we see increased ridership.

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**Bill from Burke asks:**

Not a question. Just wanted to commend you on the punctuality of the trains. You can set your watch by them and in the year I have been riding I have experienced delays only about 6-8 times.

**VRE Management:**

I like your magic watch!

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**Tara from Manassas asks:**

When is the 3rd track recently installed at L'Enfant going to be used for daytime VRE train storage. You mentioned earlier that you were waiting to get power adapters installed, but it seems like CST is using the track as an operational facility.

**VRE Management:**

There were two tracks built in the L'Enfant area. One is a third main line that CSX is using for freight trains and the other is our storage track located at the north end of the platform.

I am hoping to start using the storage track to help alleviate the congestion in our mid-day storage yard. By doing so, I can (hopefully) add cars to our trains.

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**Marc from Springfield, VA** asks:

Will VRE operate its normal schedule on Friday, December 26th and Friday, January 2nd?

**VRE Management:**

No -- we will operate on an "S" schedule those two days.

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**Jeff from Manassas** asks:

About your summons policy. Why on those rare circumstances when a person doesn't get their tickets validated don't the conductors validate (stamp) your ticket. I generally get a monthly ticket but sometimes use a 10 day pass when I'm out of town for much of the month and it is difficult to remember to validate. Are we truly interested in fining honest people? We are creatures of habit and everyone makes an occasional mistake - even you. Why do monthly riders get a break for making the same mistake? Because they can prove their honest intent?

**VRE Management:**

We only ask two things of our riders -- be at the platform before the train is scheduled to depart and have a valid ticket.

I have a zero tolerance policy for people without a valid ticket. If you feel you have been treated unfairly or unreasonably, the judge in Alexandria will adjudicate the situation.

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**Al from Burke, VA** asks:

I am a returning rider switching from metro in Springfield to the VRE in Burke to save gas. However, I can't use my SmartBenefits card to purchase VRE tickets and my office no longer distributes paper tickets. Are there any plans to allow the use of SmartTrip card to purchase tickets?

**VRE Management:**

We are working to modify our fare collection system to accept SmartTrip Cards for payment for VRE tickets. However, we can not do so until the specifications for a regional fare collection system are available. At this time, we do not anticipate the specifications to be complete for about two years.

In the meanwhile, VRE riders can use their SmartBenefits to purchase VRE tickets through Commuter Direct's Personal Service Account. Visit Commuter Direct's web site -- <http://www.commuterdirect.com> - for more details.

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from **Manassas** asks:

When is the Manassas parking garage scheduled to open, and will there be a fee? Will there be a fee for parking at the Burke Center garage?

**VRE Management:**

The Manassas garage should open by the end of July -- stay tuned. The Burke Centre garage is now open and parking is free at both garages.

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**Diane from Woodbridge, Rippon** asks:

Why was train 309 soooooo crowded last night? People were jamming every aisle and sitting on the steps.

**VRE Management:**

The consist that operates as 309 starts service as the mid-day train. Last night it took longer than usual to return to Union Station. As a result, we had to move up train 311's consist (which is one car shorter than 309's usual set) to run as 309. We sent out a Train Talk to let our riders know about the potential crowding.

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**Dan Peacock from Manassas, VA** asks:

Since the Governor has called a Special Session of the Legislature to restore Transportation Funding, should not all VRE riders who would benefit from the extra money (new cars, new engines, more frequent service, extended service) contact their state representatives in the House and Senate and urge them to restore the transportation funds so desperately needed by VRE and its loyal riders? Can VRE post the respective representatives in the State Legislature, for each jurisdiction, on its website and in the next EPA Update seat notice so the riders know the proper persons to contact?

**VRE Management:**

Good idea! The riders can go to this web site --<http://legis.state.va.us> and provide their opinions to their representatives.

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**VONDA K from WOODBRIDGE VA** asks:

Actually that Bill rider was somewhat correct. I ride daily and have for 3yrs, and im not late most of the time.. Keep at it and do add at least one more car for 304 306 and 307

**VRE Management:**

Thanks for the comments. We will work on adding cars to the trains.

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**Nancy from Quantico, VA** asks:

Are there any plans in the enar future to make the Quantico Train Depot accessible for the handicap? I have M.S. and I have exaberations, I must use my walker or cane. I went into the depot on Monday to buy my monthly pass, using my walker. I had a difficult time opening the door as it is very heavy and the door opening is narrow. Luckily a gentlemen saw me struggling and held the door open for me. I am a 31 year old female and I like to think of myself to be very independent, however, on that day, I was not.

**VRE Management:**

I'll look into this and see what can be done.

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**Steve from Burke, VA** asks:

Great to have the parking deck open at Burke Centre! We've been watching and waiting. Now that I've used the parking deck, we need to encourage walkers to stay close to the lanes of cars and not walk down the middle of lanes as this is a)dangerous & b)slows drivers trying to exit the deck. As I have not explored the complete deck, is there only one entrance and exit? If so, this seems like it has built in choke points. Again, great to have it operating!

**VRE Management:**

We'll remind our riders via our Courtesy Campaign and Safety Reminders.

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**Nancy from Quantico, VA** asks:

Why are the handicap boarding zones located at the end of the platform, opposite from the entrance to the platform and they are also located in the smoking section? It is very hard to walk down to the other end of the platform when I have no feeling in my legs and then to have to endure the smoke. Can this be changed?

**VRE Management:**

Most of our equipment has wheelchair lifts on the northernmost cars, hence the designated area. Because our new cars are equipped with lifts, I will revisit the policy of designated area for handicapped boarding zones once we have all the new equipment in place.

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**Bob from Alexandria, VA** asks:

This is the second time I've asked this question in a 3 month period. It will be asked until it's answered. Who is responsible for designing the new rail cars? There's obviously less room in the newer cars than there was/is with the older ones. The new design makes zero sense in regards to ridership increasing, gas prices rising and now less room to ride VRE. This equates to less riders which equals less revenue, which you defer to your current riders. Once again, who was responsible for this questionable decision?

**VRE Management:**

The bigger more comfortable seating is a result from passenger feedback. A majority of riders wanted to do away with the bench seating.

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**dk from Broad Run VA** asks:

A dangerous situation exists at the intersection of Piper Lane & Hwy 28. Cars exiting Piper Lane turning left onto 28 spread into both southbound lanes of 28, but the right hand lane is the lane traffic from the new shopping center should use when turning right onto 28. I've witnessed several near collisions as cars from Target attempt to turn into their right lane but are forced to suddenly stop as VRE commuters zoom around the turn in both lanes trying to beat the light. Can the county paint white dashed guidelines on the 28 turn to help keep VRE turnees in the proper (left) lane?

**VRE Management:**

I will ask Prince William County to look into this.

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**Joe from Spotsy** asks:

What is VRE doing to get more Green Also, very well done on the 30th!!! Things went very smoothly and there were little if no delays!!

**VRE Management:**

Expanding our ridership is the "greenest" thing we can move towards. Inviting your friends and co-workers to ride VRE will help us move further in that direction.

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**Kimberly from Manassas** asks:

I just wanted to say that after 18 years of commuting every way possible, the VRE is a welcome change for me. I can sleep, read or watch a DVD. I love it. And although the trains can be late, I've been in too many traffic jams and hazardous road conditions to think that driving is better. So I don't mind the occasional late train. We are completely spoiled. I'm looking forward to a station on Sudley Manor...What are the projections on that happening... Sorry if you have already addressed this, I just started riding.

**VRE Management:**

Thank you very much for the compliment.

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**Clark from Manassas** asks:

I recognize that VRE is trying to get the funding reinstated. But I'm not sure if I understand why you need it any longer. Due to gas prices, ridership volume has gone through the ceiling with standing room only now. I don't believe your planners would have had the foresight to see the gas increase and consequent increase in ridership. This looks like a windfall to VRE. Why do you need the extra money? Have you done any projections on the new model. Gas is supposed to go to \$5 by end of summer. Ridership will continue to increase. I think VRE has some explaining to do.

**VRE Management:**

Gas prices are going up for everyone -- VRE included. Our diesel fuel costs have increased almost 100% in the last year. The revenue from the fare increase does not cover this increase.

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**Steve from Burke** asks:

When all of the new cars are received later this year, will every train consist of exclusively new cars? Thanks.

**VRE Management:**

The vast majority of our fleet will be new Gallery cars. There will be a few older Gallerys and Kawasakis still in service.

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**Abraham from King George, VA** asks:

I bought a ten-ride pass with Metrocheck from a 7-11 in Fredericksburg. The pass was for \$80.90. I had three Mterocheks of \$30 each, but I was not given change, the receipt only shows an overpayment of \$9.10. Can I use the receipt as credit towards purchasing another ticket, or have I lost the remaining \$9.10? Thank you.

**VRE Management:**

Since Metrocheks are distributed using pre-tax money, vendors are not able to give change for overpayment with Metrocheks.

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**paula from Woodbridge** asks:

When will a later train or trains be added in the a.m. and p.m. from Woodbridge?

**VRE Management:**

Since HB 3202 was overturned by the Virginia Supreme Court earlier this year, we don't have any funding available to add service at this time. I don't know when I will be able to add more trains. I'm waiting for the General Assembly's special session on June 23 to review the situation.

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**Keith from Lorton, Va.** asks:

When will VRE allow regular bikes on trains? A few years ago I think VRE said it would consider doing so when new cars arrived.

**VRE Management:**

I know that many riders are interested in taking their bikes to work and I appreciate their patience. Once we have all 50 of the newest Gallery cars in service in October, we will look into allowing full-size bikes on our trains.

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**John from Manassas, VA** asks:

Do you ever get tired of answering the same inept questions from people on this forum over and over, month after month?

**VRE Management:**

No. But, sometimes it is a challenge!

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**Davin from Woodbridge, VA** asks:

Now that VRE has awarded a contract, when will construction start at the Woodbridge station, which was supposed to be last fall?

**VRE Management:**

I hope we can begin construction on the new platform at Woodbridge in July. There are a few more details to be worked out with CSX.

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**Sam from Woodbridge, VA** asks:

in the past you stated that questions that could not be answered during the hour would be posted with a response at a latter time. Where is this page at? thanks

**VRE Management:**

A transcript of the questions I am able to answer in the hour is posted to our web site. Unfortunately, I don't have time to answer all the questions after our time is up.

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**Ray from Spotsy** asks:

What is up with the lights at the Fredericksburg station? For the past 3 mornings, there was no light on the track 2 platform side. There was no light in the stairwell or thru the "tunnel" from Claibornes to the track 2 side. There also was no light in the parking lot. Also, can someone do something about the STANK under the Fredericksburg station? I'm not sure if the puddles I have to walk thru (in the dark) are rain water or raw sewage!

**VRE Management:**

Thanks for the information. I will have our Facilities Manager look into this.

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**B. from Manassas** asks:

What is the latest with the potential Amtrak step-up reduction? In addition, can you tell us how much business Amtrak lost because of the increase to \$10? Last year you said VRE's Amtrak passengers have decreased by 80%. Is that still correct?

**VRE Management:**

I'm still working on the possible reduction of the cost of the Amtrak Step-Up ticket, but I'm not sure it can be changed. Sales of Amtrak Step-Up tickets have remained consistently low since the price increase.

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**Elaine from Arlington** asks:

Is there any way to get newspaper recycling bins on the platforms of Union Station? I see people throw their papers away as they get off the train & I am sure more people would recycle if the bins were available. (I usually take my paper to the office to recycle.) There is such a bin at the Alexandria station. Thanks!

**VRE Management:**

Since we don't own the platforms at Union Station, it's not possible for us to do this. I'll make sure that we ask about it.

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**Barton from Fredericksburg** asks:

Status of leased locomotives????

**VRE Management:**

They need additional work before they are put into service. They will be brought on line as soon as this work is completed.

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

Are there any discussions about running at least one train that bypasses stations? Ex. According to ridership numbers, less people ride use Rolling Road, Backlick Rd, and Alexandria stations. Getting the VRE from Manassas area and Burke to Downtown in 30-45 minutes would increase ridership greatly. It would help validate extending the line to Gainesville and Haymarket.

**VRE Management:**

I am looking at possibly adding "express" trains once service to Gainesville/Haymarket is in place. However, funding is not currently available to add more trains to our service.

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**Ron from Bristow** asks:

I'm amazed that people still keep asking about binding noises between cars. Haven't you people ever ridden trains before? Those noises are steel couplers rubbing against each other as the cars sway and turn. You can't completely eliminate those noises, so buy some ear plugs and get used to it.

**VRE Management:**

Here's another perspective on the noise issue.

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**Matt from Lorton, VA** asks:

Why do conductors hold the train doors open as the train leaves the station? When they do that you keep hearing "The doors are about to close" repeating over and over.

**VRE Management:**

The conductors are required to view the platform as the train leaves the station.

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**AI from Springfield, VA asks:**

Are there any more track projects VRE has to complete before CSX will allow VRE to add more trains?

**VRE Management:**

Contractually VRE could add trains now -- but we do not have the funding to do so.

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**Dan from Warrenton VA asks:**

Not a question, but a comment - kudos to the entire VRE staff for uneventful rides on Friday, May 30th. The planned disruption was inconvenient, but the transportation alternatives were well planned, well communicated and extremely well implemented. Many of us are quick to complain when something goes wrong; let this serve as a quick thank you for a job well-done.

**VRE Management:**

Thank you for the kind words. I'll make sure that everyone involved sees them.

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**Ken from Burke, VA asks:**

At many stations there are no bike racks. What can VRE or riders do to ensure bike racks are available at every station?

**VRE Management:**

At many of our stations the locality owns the land around our platforms. As a result, we are not in a position to add bike racks without local approval and/or assistance. If bike racks are not available at your station, please email [Gotrains@vre.org](mailto:Gotrains@vre.org) with your request and we will see if the locality is willing to work with us on adding them.

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**VRE Management:**

I always like to end on a happy note. There were a lot of questions today and I have had so much fun that I did not realize that I had run over!

If you are concerned about transportation funding for Northern Virginia, please consider contacting your delegate and senator with your opinion. The General Assembly will meet on June 23rd to consider transportation funding for Northern Virginia.

We will see you again on July 2.

Dale

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