

# Virginia Railway Express

## Let's Talk!

The next VRE online forum will start on Wednesday, March 4th at 12 noon. CSX officials, Jay Westbrook and Bob Sullivan, will be joining us and answering your CSX related questions.



There are currently 67 questions waiting to be answered.

### **VRE Management:**

Good afternoon. Thanks for joining us this cold wintery day. Joining me today is Jay Westbrook from CSX. Bob Sullivan is joining us by phone and is here in spirit.

Before we get started, I do want to make a shameless plug for our new Facebook page. If you didn't catch it in our Train Talk e-newsletter yesterday, be sure to hop on Facebook and find us.

And now, on with the questions!

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### **Matt from Burke, VA asks:**

I know you probably have answered this question a dozen times, but I seem to have missed the answer. Why can we not add a car to the Southbound Broad Run Train #329? I get on in Alexandria and have to stand with 100s of other riders. One day I saw a guy ride between the cars, now I know that is dangerous, so is having so many packed into the vestibule and the isles. This is an tragedy waiting to happen. What can be done? Things are really bad... Thanks!

### **VRE Management:**

Our system's ridership has increased sharply over the past year and has put a strain on all of our trains. The first problem is that our mid-day storage yard in D.C. has no more room for any more cars. On top of that, public subsidies will not increase due to the times we are in, which would be needed to increase service.

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### **VRE Runner from Broad Run asks:**

Dear CSX. It says on your website "To be the safest, most progressive North American railroad, relentless in the pursuit of customer and employee excellence." Last year there was talk about a foreign hedge fund buying up CSX. If this happens will you still be able to provide the same [and I quote] "excellent" level of service to the VRE ?

### **VRE Management:**

CSX: In 2008, those was a proxy fight that resulted in four new members to our 12 person board. That board is focused on keeping CSX strong and prepared for the future. We remain committed to providing safe, efficient and reliable ('excellent') service for all of our customers and commuter agencies including VRE.

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### **John from Manassas, VA asks:**

As feared in the Fall, when last I brought up the subject, the Winter has seriously further deteriorated the stair treads at the Manassas Park station. What is your plan to make the steps safe?

### **VRE Management:**

I will ask our Facilities Manager look into it.

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### **Tom from Fredericksburg asks:**

A long time ago, it was said that CSX has to money to do repairs to the Fredericksburg station. Over five years that I have been using that station, I have not seen any repairs! I see that they erected some signs that say Fredericksburg. They gave the exposed metal a coat of paint and that has been about it. I have not seen any repairs to the station. There are windows with missing panes of glass. The concrete is cracked and falling apart. I am concerned that one of these days a chunk on concrete will fall on someone's head! The station is a safety hazard

**VRE Management:**

CSX: While CSXT is not responsible for the maintenance of the Fredericksburg Station, we are responsible for the viaduct that supports the tracks. The viaduct is structurally sound. Regarding its appearance, we are working cooperatively with VRE to find an acceptable solution that does not involve shutting down the railroad for an extended period of time.

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**Ray from Broad Run asks:**

Could you provide more specifics regarding "efficiency" testing, since all previous answers seem to come up short? What, exactly, is being tested? Do the on-train crews have to get on the radio to answer multiple-choice questions about regulations and procedures? Do they have to mark their answers on bubble sheets and turn them in at Manassas Park? What is being tested that cannot be addressed by inspection in the rail yard or by the reverse-flow trains? **BOTTOM LINE:** If it's really "speed control" testing, why not just call it that?

**VRE Management:**

CSX: Efficiency testing is required by federal regulation and is essential to insure the safety of those riding and operating trains. Accordingly, CSXT jointly participates on test teams that include representatives of the Federal Railroad Administration and Amtrak. These tests check for compliance with all federal regulations dealing with a train's operation. The most critical of these – tests dealing with a crew's reaction to a restricting signal – require the crew to stop within one-half their range of vision in order to avoid a train ahead or other obstacles. Unfortunately, this often results in some delay to the train. Checks which are not required to be conducted while en route are routinely conducted in the yards to avoid delays to passengers. These tests are conducted across our nation's railroads and include freight trains.

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**David from Gainesville asks:**

Can VRE petition PW County (or Manassas?) to add a shoulder/bike lane on Piper Lane at Broad Run. The entire Linton Hall Rd now has a bike sidewalk and Piper is soooo dangerous. I could ride 6 miles but the last mile... I've seen bikers do it but it is really scary. Lets go green! VRE might have more clout in asking. I could too.

**VRE Management:**

We are also looking at the possibility to run a pilot bike locker at that station. With that, I will see if bike paths to the station can also be improved.

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**Joe from Broad Run asks:**

It's about time you made a facebook page. The MARC people have a "MARC Train 534 BarCar". When can we get "VRE Train 333 BarCar"

**VRE Management:**

I am glad, too, that we are jumping on social networking sites. VRE's best advertisement has always been word of mouth, and I hope the word spreads on Facebook. As social as I want VRE to be, I don't see happy hour being promoted on our trains anytime soon.

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**Dave from Bristow VA asks:**

NS has a MUCH friendlier policy toward VRE. They authorize faster running in hot weather and get the line cleared of snow much quicker; further, their signaling system has less problems. I'm sure NS has safety in mind first as well, so safety should not be a factor here. Maybe you can get with them and get a consistent policy toward commuter trains as VRE shares both tracks. Thanks.

**VRE Management:**

CSX: The Fredericksburg Line has far more traffic than the Manassas Line. We work closely with VRE to provide the best possible service. We believe there has been a vast improvement in on time performance in the summer

months.

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**Corinne** from **Lorton** asks:

This morning when i bought a 10 trip ticket at the Lorton Platform it was not the station combination I needed. Instead of Lorton to Crystal City, it printed Lorton to Fredericksburg. How do I exchange for the correct ticket combination. I think the cold screen was the issue.

**VRE Management:**

Mail in your ticket and fill out a ticket exchange form, found at <http://www.vre.org/service/Tix-Exchange-Form.pdf> and will we will get you new ticket. I will also have our Fare Collection Manager look into the TVM.

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**Richard** from **Stafford, VA.** asks:

The "no tolerance" policy still isn't working. Someone today on Fredericksburg 304 didn't have a validated ticket because he didn't hear the train coming and didn't have time to validate. Nothing was done. Why are the conductors so afraid to issue a summons?

**VRE Management:**

We have found the conductors enforcing the zero tolerance policy have deterred those from trying to cheat the system. I will continue to work with the conductors on this issue.

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**Nathan** from **Ladysmith, VA** asks:

Do we know yet, what, if any impact the stimulus money will have for the VRE?

**VRE Management:**

We hope to get at least enough money to purchase two additional locomotives, in addition to our original order of five.

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**dk** from **Warrenton** asks:

Why do CSX Dispatchers hold Manassas train # 324 south of Alexandria to wait for the late running Fredericksburg 300 to go ahead of it? By doing this, not only is F300 late, but M324 is late, too.

**VRE Management:**

CSX: Often a dispatcher has to keep the whole railroad in mind not just the interaction between two trains and while you may see a delay caused by train 300, the dispatcher may see delays to far more trains by stopping 300.

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**Tito** from **Manassas Park** asks:

how come when we're besides a freight train, our train always seems to be going slower?

**VRE Management:**

I am assuming the freight train is stopped.

CSX: For everyone's safety all trains approach the disabled train prepared to stop.

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**Tinisha** from **Richmond, VA** asks:

How come the train does not come down to Richmond? Second how come there is not an earlier train? I know plenty of people who need to be at work in Washington, D.C by 6:30AM but cannot use your service because the earliest train doesnt arrive until 6:52AM.

**VRE Management:**

VRE is funded by local jurisdictions, not the Commonwealth. For VRE to extend service to Richmond, more counties and/or the City of Richmond would have to join. Regarding an earlier train, I am working on being able to provide an early express train for the Fredericksburg Line.

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**Scott from Bristow, VA** asks:

Any word on when we will see the full-size bike policy? Thanks for considering it.

**VRE Management:**

Hopefully soon. We are working on it right now. Our fleet is not entirely new Gallery coaches yet, so we may have to move some sets as we only want to have bikes on certain trains. Once all the details are finalized, we will inform our riders.

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**AI from Lorton, VA** asks:

To CSX: Why won't you let VRE run turn-around trains like they do the Manassas Line?

**VRE Management:**

I know you addressed this to CSX but I thought I would answer.

It is simply not practical. It takes an hour and fifteen minutes with no stops to get back from Fredericksburg to make a run.

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**Diane from Woodbridge** asks:

On Wednesday January 14, 2009 I rode train # 307 from Union Station to Rippon. I was sitting in the second car from the front, in the right upper section, third seat back. I left a white zipper down vest on the shelf next to my seat. As soon as I departed the train I realized I forgot it, but by then the train doors had closed. I called VRE and gave a lost and found report. The vest was never returned. Someone has my vest, and I would like to ask the perpetrator to return it. Thank you for printing this.

**VRE Management:**

I am sorry to hear that you lost your vest. While we have a very good return rate, the unfortunate reality is there are some dishonest people who ride our trains.

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**Julie from Fairfax, VA** asks:

Mr. Zehner, What would you say your principal strategy is for competing and earning profits given that a portion of VRE is government subsidized? Secondly, again, since the government provides subsidies, are there any public policies that help or hurt VRE?

**VRE Management:**

VRE is not a profit making company. We are a quasi-government agency owned by the local jurisdictions that we serve. Since we depend on about half of our operating budget from public funds, VRE could never make a profit, nor is that the primary goal. Our goal is to safely operate a transportation service that gives commuters a reliable alternative to driving their cars. To answer your second question, obviously current funding policies greatly affect VRE as ridership is up but funding is not.

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**Ralph from Burke, VA** asks:

Are there any plans to lengthen the platforms of stations with short platforms?

**VRE Management:**

We start construction of the Burke platform extension later this month and Woodbridge's second platform is currently under construction.

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**Ashok from Lorton, VA** asks:

IF i hold a monthly pass, couldn't catch the last morning train, what are my options to go to Washington DC? Does the Metro accept my monthly pass?

**VRE Management:**

Metrorail does not. However non-express Metrobus, Fairfax Connector, and OmniRide buses do.

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**JOSPEH** from **FREDERICKSBURG** asks:

Can you please remind passengers to refrain from reserving seats for their friends? Your conductors cannot service the whole train at times. Some of these passengers appear irate and disturbed and might go psycho on me. I value my life too much to confront them aggressively.

**VRE Management:**

This is an on going courtesy issue we will continue to discourage through forums like this, on board announcements, Train Talks, and our VRE Update.

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**Robert** from **Virginia** asks:

My wife and I both commute to Washington DC four days per week and telecommute once per week on a different day. I would like to purchase a monthly ticket that I would use four days per week, and my would purchase separate ten ride tickets. On my telecommute day, is it permissible for her to use my monthly ticket?

**VRE Management:**

Monthly tickets are only allowed to be used by the signatory. If you and your wife are only telecommuting once a week, getting two monthly tickets is still your most cost effective method.

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**CK** from **Stafford, VA** asks:

I have been a rider since day one. I have never seen such horrible on time performance between constant mechanical problems and CSX scheduling problems. What is being done to address both?

**VRE Management:**

With over 90% performance the last two months, I am surprised you have not seen the improvement. While this week has been difficult due to the snow and ice, the roads have not been much better.

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**Evonne** from **Woodbridge, VA** asks:

What news or radio stations offer early morning service updates for VRE? On Monday I tried calling at 5am and your telephone lines offered no more than a greeting.

**VRE Management:**

We did update our automated phone line. The best way to receive information is to sign up for Train Talk. In the meanwhile, the list of media updates are listed on our snow page on our website.

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**Will** from **Fredericksburg** asks:

I understand that you have various levels of influence when it comes to snow removal. Whoever pays for removal in Fred is not getting their money's worth. It was pretty poor the last two days.

**VRE Management:**

There are several different entities responsible for snow removal. If you can send an email with specifics (i.e., which lot or platform), our Facilities Manager will continue to work with the responsible parties.

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**Brian** from **Manassas** asks:

NS switch heaters seem more effective than those on CSX. Any way to improve the key ones at AF and L'Enfant?

**VRE Management:**

CSX: Switch heaters are only as good as the commercial power supplying them. In the numerous situations the switches near Alexandria and our Crossroads yards have lost power during snow and ice storms requiring VRE crews to hand throw the switches and taking a 10-15 minute delay.

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**Michelle** from **Richmond VA** asks:

Facebook is good but Twitter is better for quicker messaging. Will WRE be setting up a Twitter account? VDOTs Twitter road condition update was great during the snow this week!

**VRE Management:**

I have great news for you. We are working towards a Twitter account. That will be coming soon. #skittles

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**Steven** from **Warrenton Bluffs** asks:

Can we get WINC FM 92.5 piped into the non-quiet cars? Love that station.

**VRE Management:**

While I like your sentiment I am not sure everyone could agree on the right station. April said she wants Metallica piped in during the morning so she can wake up.

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**Standing** from **Springfield, VA** asks:

During the Nov 2008 online forum you offered to research installing seating under the shelter at Franconia-Springfield, as all the benches were out in the elements. Have you had an opportunity to look into that?

**VRE Management:**

The bench was removed in order to put the TVMs in a place more protected in the weather. After looking into putting bench under the canopy, the only truly feasible place does not allow for a lot of room between the bench and the edge of the platform. This is too much of a safety risk

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**Michael** from **Hume, VA** asks:

It's a little late, but concerning the leaf oil delays - do the sanders on the locomotives help?

**VRE Management:**

The sanders do help, but unfortunately, depending on the amount of leaves that have fallen on the tracks they may not be the entire solution. I know a lot of our riders think that leaf oil is a "bogus excuse." I think we all have had something in our lives that was so small we thought it couldn't affect us. If you have extreme reactions to mosquitoes, you'll know what I mean.

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**John** from **Springfield, VA** asks:

I like the new look of the VRE Update newsletter. However, why did you use a graphic of your old gallery cars instead of the new ones?

**VRE Management:**

Thanks, we are changing the looks of a few things around here. We use the graphic of the old Gallery cars since it is more colorful when our advertisers pay for color issues.

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**Tony** from **Stafford** asks:

Will vre extend the date to use metrocheck. Or will vre let u buy more then a month ahead

**VRE Management:**

Monthly tickets for April go on sale on March 10. This should give you ample time to purchase your ticket and meet the March 20 deadline.

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

Is there an expected increase for the VRE fares this year?

**VRE Management:**

Yes, our budget proposal for fiscal year 2010, which starts on July 1, 2009, includes a 6% fare increase.

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**Dj from Stafford** asks:

What happen to the snow removal guys at leeland. The parking lot is a mess

**VRE Management:**

VDOT is responsible for the Leeland Road lot and we are not allowed to touch it. With a storm of this magnitude, their emphasis is on primary roads and public safety places like near hospitals and fire stations. Unfortunately, in the grand scheme of their plans, VRE lots are towards the bottom.

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**mark from VA** asks:

Some people buy tickets to specific zone, but the actually go to another zone. example buy tickets to go from zone 9 to zone 3 but the actually end at zone 2. It will be good to do a random tickets inspection when arriving to different zones.

**VRE Management:**

I agree. I will ask Amtrak to remind their crews to step up enforcement between zones.

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**Dagunny from Fredericksburg** asks:

With the Amtrak trains being empty from Union St. to Fredericksburg, wouldnt it make more efficient use of passenger spillover and keeping trains on time if VRE passengers were allowed to use Amtrak without a huge stepup fee of \$10? Less crowding. Quicker unload times. Renegotiation of stepup fees should be energized. Even some revenue to Amtrak is better than none (empty seats). Perhaps we need to get the politicians involved since Federal money gets used for VRE. How about some renewed effort? Even increasing a monthly ticket slightly to allow no stepups. Perhaps a dual monthly ticket?

**VRE Management:**

I have approached Amtrak several times about reducing the Step-Up fee. They are not interested. I even approached them about offering weekend Step-Up service. They indicated that they are not interested. Rather than eliminate the program entirely, I prefer to keep it in place, because I know that there are those riders willing to pay it.

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**MJ Bucci from Falmouth** asks:

This one's for the CSX Officials... what provisions are in place to "police" clean up the area along the tracks?

There are some sections, such as from Quantico to Alexandria, that is just littered with trash, tires, buckets, cans, piles of wood & spikes along the rails and in the wood line. It's not very pleasant to look at during each hour long trip. What is CSX's SOP for cleaning up along the tracks ?

**VRE Management:**

CSX: We are continually challenged by those who choose to dispose of their trash on our right-of-way. We work closely with local law enforcement in an attempt to prevent the littering. With regard to track material, CSX stages key components along side the right-of-way to speed recovery and minimize train delays.

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**Julie from Fairfax, VA** asks:

Mr. Zehner, Clearly you have commuters of all sorts taking the VRE daily from Manassas, Fredericksburg, etc. Some are military with high turnover/rotation rates. What do you see as your primary market(s) and what do you view as important characteristics of your market?

**VRE Management:**

We know we lose 30% of our ridership every year because of the transient nature of the workforce in this area. We also know that our demographic of our rider averages 45, higher income, and middle to upper management. Their key concern is on-time performance. We are working reaching the younger demographic, this is why we established our Facebook page and starting Twitter service soon.

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**Gene from Dumfries** asks:

Thank you for having these discussions. I normally travel on the Fredricksburg line but have had the opportunity to travel on the Manassas line as well. Norfolk Southern seems to be better about keeping up appearances on the

rail sidings. When traveling on the CSX tracks there is often work related materials that have been left on the sides of the track for years. What is the CSX policy about maintaining the environment along the track?

**VRE Management:**

CSX: I know I answered a similiar question and hope that covers your concern as well.

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**Anthony from Manassas, VA asks:**

Why is the quiet car closest to the steam engine and whistle? If it is suppose to be quiet, why not place it on the other end?

**VRE Management:**

The quiet car had to be placed in a consistent place along the train, which gives only two options, the car closest to the locomotive or the car furthest away. The car furthest from the locomotive is also the car that our riders with disabilities tend to ride. Rather than force them to be in a "quiet car" when they cannot choose, we opted to make the quiet car closest to the locomotive.

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**Mike from Gainesville, VA asks:**

The feasibility study for the Gainesville/Haymarket extension on the Manassas Line was set to finish this month. Is there anything you can tell us about the results yet? What is your estimation of how long it will take to get service started to Gainesville, even if it is only a partial implementation and not the entire, completed plan.

Thanks.

**VRE Management:**

The feasibility study encountered a delay in the analysis but is now on track to be complete in June 2009. The other analysis has determined a VRE extension to Gainesville-Haymarket has merit based on initial ridership and other user/community benefits evaluation. A public meeting to present the study results is planned for late April or early May.

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

What factors explain VRE's dramatic improvement in "on time" performance over the last 3 months?

**VRE Management:**

I'm glad you noticed. Factors include better maintenance of VRE equipment, relocation of CSX dispatchers to Baltimore, improved communication with CSX and NS, and improved CSX and NS railroad infrastructure.

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**William from Manassas, VA asks:**

It seems to me that there are not enough signs at the train stations to let "new" passengers know that they have to buy a ticket prior to boarding. I moved here from NY and did not see the signs (I did know from talking to someone prior to boarding that I had to buy a ticket first). In order to fine someone, I think there should be a sign everywhere on the platform so that it is not missed and maybe even a sign on each train to let someone know. With that said, rather than put signs up, why don't the conductors sell tickets on-board the train, with an on-board penalty, such as an extra \$10

**VRE Management:**

Having people, or specifically conductors, collect money is a very expensive proposition. There is too much potential for money to go missing. When VRE was originally set up, there was a deliberate choice to be as cashless as possible. There is a very large sign at the main entrance to all of our stations. While this may be an unpopular thought, our riders need to be responsible for knowing how to pay their fare.

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

During the snow earlier this winter, and the current snow, the sidewalk along side the street leading into the Manassas Park station has not been cleared as in previous years. This makes it difficult and hazardous for those of us who live in the apartments across the street, or those who park along the street leading into the Manassas Park station. This morning (3/4/09) snow had been piled onto the sidewalk, leaving the middle of the street as the only place to walk. This is dangerous, especially when it is dark. Was the lack of clearing of this particular

sidewalk an oversight?

**VRE Management:**

The City of Manassas Park is responsible for snow removal from the traffic circle to the access road, including the sidewalk you are referring to. I will ask our Facilities Manager to work with the City on this issue.

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**Mike from Fairfax Station** asks:

Regarding Leaf Oil: I read recently of a railroad that used high pressure water using the compressed air system to clear the tracks when the loss of traction would have tripped the sanding system. They found it worked pretty well, with fast acting valves under computer control. With the number of R&D types as well as engineers, you could probably get some high quality technical assistance free for the asking among the passengers!

**VRE Management:**

I have seen that SEPTA and Metro-North both have high pressure water equipment to clear the tracks. Unfortunately the numbers of times we would need it would be cost prohibitive.

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**jules from fredericksburg, va** asks:

when we were talking about an early train, i thought we were talking about 4:45am, not 5:05am. the 5:05am would not do much good, as it would really just be getting us to our destination station on time. are there considerations being given for an earlier early train?

**VRE Management:**

The discussion on a early train would be an express train that would stop at Fredericksburg, Leeland, and Brooke and then express to Alexandria. This allows us to stay in our operating window and still provide the service that has been asked for.

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

If you are trying to attract younger riders, you should really consider a later evening train to allow young people to participate in social activities after work. I know funding is tight, but if I were a younger professional a huge drawback of VRE would be having to catch the last train.

**VRE Management:**

You make a good point. This is something I have been looking into and it is in the long range plans.

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**Chris from Warrenton Buffs** asks:

All the single ladies should ride Train #329, 2nd rail car, upper left side...

**VRE Management:**

It's hard enough running a railroad, I can't possibly add a dating service on top of that. But seriously, we have heard from a number of couples that have met on the train that eventually got married. You will just have to find Mrs. Right on your own.

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**VRE Management:**

We have run past one o'clock. I want to thank Jay and Bob for participating today. We were able to get in a good mix of VRE and railroad questions.

We'll see you April 1st at the next forum. I will entertain all of your questions, comments, and pranks.

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