

# Virginia Railway Express

## Let's Talk!

The next VRE online forum will start on Wednesday, April 1st at 1:00pm.



There are currently 46 questions waiting to be answered.

### **VRE Management:**

Thanks for joining me today. I couldn't find my heiroglyphic translation software. So, on this April Fools day -- we will go on without it.

It looks like we have quite a number of questions about the recent delays. so, let's jump right in!

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### **John from Broadrun asks:**

Why does it take longer for the trains to get from Broadrun (BR) to Union Station (US) in after noon than it takes to get from US to BR in the morning?

### **VRE Management:**

Manassas Train #336 in the afternoon runs for one hour and twenty minutes. The other afternoon reverse flow train, #338, runs for one hour and fifteen minutes. The morning reverse flow train, #321, also runs one hour and fifteen minutes. A five minute difference for #336 is due to the fact that it stops at more stations than the other two.

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### **Thomas from Fred asks:**

On the consist page, why do consists with the same car makeup have different totals for the number of available seats?

### **VRE Management:**

It takes into account that some consists have more bathrooms than others, which makes for less seats.

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### **Doug from Gainesville, Virginia asks:**

I have two traffic items. The first is the arrows painted on the parking lot at Broad Run. Very few people pay attention to them and it causes serious difficulties because most of those lanes ar not wide enoguh to truly allow two way vehicle traffic. Accident waiting to happen (although a low speed accident most likely). Worse problem is people turning left at Piper lane and Nokesville, most drivers are turning from Piper to the right hand lane on Nokesville, cutting off drivers coming out of Target parking lot. There needs to be something to prevent a major accident there.

### **VRE Management:**

This is a problem I have presented to Prince William County several times. I will let them know again.

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### **Oversubsidized and underpaid from Manassas asks:**

With the transit subsidy for federal government employees increasing 90% (from \$120 per month to \$230 per month), is it only a matter of time before VRE proposes a 90% fare increase?

### **VRE Management:**

While we do depend on the fare box for funding, we would not increase the fares just because public transit benefits have now increased to the same level as parking benefits. In fact, I am working to see if I can reduce the

proposed 6% fare increase for FY2010 if not eliminate it at all.

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**Blinded by the light** from asks:

No question, just a courtesy comment. Each morning, I arrive at the parking lot early and sit in my car until a few minutes before the train arrives. In the winter, while I am sitting in my car, I leave the car running, so I have some heat and warmth before I brave the elements. My car has 24-hour running lights, meaning that my headlights are on whenever the car is running. Unfortunately, this function cannot be turned off. Recently, another vehicle has parked across from me (with our headlights facing each other). After a few minutes, the gentleman in the other vehicle turns his headlights on since mine are on. I understand his frustration, but he may not understand that I do not have an option in having my headlights on or off, as he does. I just wanted to remind folks that sometimes people don't have an option on having their headlights on or off if they want to keep their car running in order to stay warm. Thank you.

**VRE Management:**

There you go folks, sometimes people are not intentionally trying to frustrate other people. Thank you for your understanding.

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**Jeff from Brandy Station, VA** asks:

I see that VA has approved a commuter train that will run from Lynchburg to DC on a daily basis, starting this Fall. Will this have any affect on the VRE schedule?

**VRE Management:**

We have been working with VA Dept of Rail and Public Transit (VDRPT) to minimize the impact state sponsored trains will have on our schedule. The Lynchburg train is proposed to go north through our area well after our morning service has ended, but plans to go south in the middle of our afternoon/evening rush hour. VDRPT, Amtrak, and VRE are all working together to make the best plan possible for commuter and inter-city service.

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**Carolyn from Fredericksburg, VA** asks:

Some of the conductors could be more helpful. But also, some are very helpful. How do I let management who when an conductor has been particularly helpful?

**VRE Management:**

You can let us know by using the Personnel Comment Form on our web site (<http://www.vre.org/feedback/comments.php>). If at all possible we would like the crew member's name. If you don't know that please include train number and a description of the individual.

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**Clator from Rippon Station** asks:

I have noticed people routinely having the vestibule doors close on them mid-stride. They don't seem to sense when an obstruction prevents them from closing all the way like, say, a garage door does. Is there anything that can be installed, such as an electronic eye, so that people will stop having doors close on them?

**VRE Management:**

Our best advice is to move the rubber strip on the interior doors in a lateral direction and the door will retract. For those of you queueing between stations, we recommend that you not stand in the door way.

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**Steve from Fredericksburg** asks:

Good Day: I'm confused on "train orders" and how they work. In the internet/satellite/cellular era, are engineers still dependent upon paper to physically arrive in their hands before movement begins? We all appreciate safety, but this seems like overkill.

**VRE Management:**

Yes, they are paper orders that each member of a train's crew must physically have on hand during service. These orders can be 4-5 pages (or longer) and they discuss speed restrictions and special track conditions that are present at that time of day.

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**Jay from Mechanisville** asks:

Beyond bus service...will VRE ever extend it service to the Richmond area?

**VRE Management:**

No, not at this time. Although, the Commonwealth will be adding a train for Richmond to Washington service in about a year.

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**Johnnie from F'Burg, Virginia** asks:

Dale - I've noticed new rail ties along the tracks. Is CSX gearing up for another round of tie replacements? If so, any projected dates? ALSO - the F'burg trains seem to slow between Brooke and Quantico, as well as while transiting the Potomac Creek bridge. Is there ongoing track work between those two stops? Is there an issue with the bridge over Potomac Creek? I know these are several questions, but since they're all interrelated, I'm hoping you oblige

**VRE Management:**

I don't know of any upcoming rail tie projects. However, CSX did just complete track resurfacing between Fredericksburg and Quantico. This was the reason for the speed restrictions in March.

In, June it is likely that CSX will be replacing some rail in our service area. Once we have more information, we will let you know.

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**DaGunny from Spotsylvania** asks:

With the recent nonsense with Stafford for non-Stafford residents boarding in Stafford and Spotsy not joining - Perhaps Spotsy would join if an express 1st morning train originated at a new Spotsy station and went direct to Alex, CC, L'enfant, and Union bypassing Stafford and Fredericksburg? What an olive branch.

**VRE Management:**

I have been working towards an early morning express train. It would be ready to go long before we could even have a station in Spotsylvania built. More likely than not, we would start the express train with stops in Fredericksburg, Leeland, and Brooke. If Spotsylvania were to join, we could modify the schedule according to the new rider information.

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**AI from Woodbridge, VA** asks:

What is VRE doing in response to 5 engine failures in March and did VRE figure out the cause of the failures, such as Train #307?

**VRE Management:**

We had four engine failures -- two on each line.

307 - failed water pump

325 - failed auxillary generator

338 - electrical short in the blower for traction motor

301 - failed power assembly

As you can see, none of the failures are the same. But, here's what we are doing (and have been doing for the last two years);

If an engine component fails (water pump, aux. generator) -- we will replace that component on every locomotive. Because of past failures, we have replaced the fuel pump, turbocharger and main generator bearings on all locomotives. We will continue this practice until we get new engines.

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**Randy from Bristow VA** asks:

VRE holds a general misconception that all government workers and contractors get fuel subsidy assistance. Many riders pay full fare each month from our pockets and get disheartened when we read clear connotations that subsidies are grounds for increases. Recent fare increases were predicated on fuel costs that were doubled compared to current prices. Trains are full daily (standing room) and it is hard to swallow that the VRE cannot breakeven. What percent increase is VRE going to request (June – August)?

**VRE Management:**

I would argue that VRE riders have a misconception. We do not base our fares on the what the transit benefit may, or may not, be. Our fares are based on the operating budget minus whatever assistance we get from state and local funding. Currently, the budget beginning in July includes a 6% increase in fares , but I am working to see if we can reduce it.

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**Joe Burgess from Fredericksburg, VA** asks:

Why does Manassas always get the primo trains? We always seem to break down or have some issue with trains. I cannot remember when I last got an email stating that they had engine problems. I certainly don't want them to suffer but we do travel much further than their line goes.

**VRE Management:**

As you can see from my earlier response, Manassas line trains have been having some issues as well. It may be that your Train Talk account is set up to only receive Fredericksburg line alerts.

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**ron from fairfax, va** asks:

i found several old metrochecks. i am a TLC ticket holder, what are my options to convert these old cards??

**VRE Management:**

Sorry, you will have to talk to your employer or WMATA about possibly exchanging them for the new vouchers.

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**Garcia E. Vega from Fredericksburg** asks:

I mentioned this in a previous On-Line Forum, but with apparently no results. Quite often on the cab car of train #300, I smell cigar smoke coming through the air vents, and I suspect it is somebody on the crew who is doing it since I doubt any passenger would be so bold as to light up with other passengers around. Please look into this. No smoking means NO SMOKING.

**VRE Management:**

Thank you for letting me know about this. I'll make sure it stops.

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**MJBucci from Falmouth** asks:

I know I can, but it would seem that VRE would get a better response by contacting the Stafford Sherrifs Office and have them do a patrol of Leeland Station. The illegal parking is rampant i.e., no parking zones, motorcycle zone, hatched zones etc. Hey, Stafford Co. lots of money to be made [parking enforcement], let's do it for the Budget's sake.

**VRE Management:**

I will have our Manager of Transportation Services, Safety and Security contact Stafford to see if they can step the enforcement.

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**Jack from Burke** asks:

Can you speak to the horrendous commute from delays and cancellations that occurred on the Manassas line on the afternoon of 18 March, how it was handled by VRE, and what can be done to avoid it in the future? I -heart- VRE, but that day really tested the relationship.

**VRE Management:**

I sent a message in a Train Talk speaking to how it is unacceptable to have three locomotive failures in two days. Yesterday, I met with senior officials at Amtrak to voice my concern as to how they are maintaining our locomotives. The two failures that affected the Manassas Line that day were especially bad because those two

trains happened to be the "turn" trains that operate multiple trips. When a non-turn train fails, we can usually wait for the next train to come and push it in to its final destination.

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**Ken from Burke** asks:

Sir -- I was pleasantly surprised yesterday at the Efficiency Test. Not only was it only a minor delay (under 5 minutes), but the crew informed us quickly. (That's assuming you could hear the conductor). I'd never seen these tests done in the afternoon. It's good to know they can be spread out a little more for less impacts and inconvenience. Kudos!

**VRE Management:**

Glad you noticed. I have asked for some efficiency testing to be done in the afternoon as well as the morning. In addition, I have asked that the test be abbreviated to one item instead of multiple items. Both NS and CSX have modified their procedures. Hopefully, you will see less test related delays.

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**Fred from Fairfax** asks:

The recent article in the Post about the new state-funded train service to/from Lynchburg and Richmond noted that the Amtrak step-up fee would apply to these trains. Why should the fee apply to these trains? Given that the trains are stopping at VRE stations, the intent seems to be to widen the options for commuters. However, the step-up fee will act as an effective deterrent.

**VRE Management:**

To the average person, the state funded trains will look and act like a regular Amtrak train. As a result, the Step-Up program will be in place as it is with any Amtrak train that operates through our service area.

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**Ashok from Lorton,VA** asks:

If i am holding a monthly ticket and want to get to work after the last train at 8:37(in Lorton), what are my options? Does Metro accept my monthly ticket?

**VRE Management:**

Metro will not accept your regular VRE Monthly pass. If you want Metro as an option, I suggest you look into getting a Monthly TLC pass which is accepted on VRE and Metrorail. Check our web site for information on the TLC (<http://www.vre.org/service/vretlc.htm>).

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**Ashley from Fredricksburg VA** asks:

Train 301 has become an absolute joke. It is routinely 25-30 mins late. How is VRE planning to resolve the deplorable on time performance of this train? Most riders taking the mid day, are doing so to get home early for a reason (sick kid, appt, etc...). It is just unacceptable that it took over 3 hours Wed to get from Alexandria to Fredricksburg.

**VRE Management:**

I agree with you. I am working to make sure mechanical delays are reduced. We had a two month stretch were we had at least 90% on-time performance on both lines and am working to get back there. We will begin receiving the first of nine new engines by the fall of 2010.

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from **gainesville, va** asks:

who currently maintains your locomotives?

**VRE Management:**

We use a number of firms, depending on the nature of the problem, time constraints to fix the problem and dollar amounts. Here they are: Amtrak, TTI Corp., Norfolk Southern, MotivePower and RailPlan.

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**Jack from Woodbridge** asks:

Glad to see the new platform construction has begun. Will there be room for a third track to allow for capacity

growth or will the platforms have to be torn up in the future to allow for a third track? Hopefully, it's the former and we're not wasting money on something we'll have to redo down the road. Again, glad to see progress.

**VRE Management:**

Yes, CSX and VRE both see that three main tracks throughout our entire service area is something we both can benefit from. There are plans to shift the western most track towards the new platform at Woodbridge to allow room for a third track down the middle.

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**Debbie from Fredericksburg, VA** asks:

How can you possibly even consider another fare increase so soon on the heels of the last increase, while service recently, at least on the Fredericksburg line, has gone down significantly in terms of being on time and having reliable equipment?! We should have all brand new equipment in top notch condition for what we are paying now, not to mention an increase!!! And just because an increase in subsidy was mentioned, do not think for a moment that the Agencies have the money to increase our transit allotment. NOT happening!

**VRE Management:**

Public transportation, especially commuter rail is expensive to run which is the reason a private company does not venture into the mass-transit business; it would never make a profit. Only 60% of our operating costs are covered by fares.

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**Marvin from Fredericksburg, Va** asks:

What is the Projected Start Date of Fredericksburg Express Train? What is the projected Time of Departure from Fredericksburg. What are the Stops? Please Franconia/Springfield or King St What are the projected Fares?

**VRE Management:**

No expected start date yet, but it is contingent on few thing, like the L'Enfant Storage tracks have to be finished (there are a few punch list items remaining). I would like it to leave at 5:05 am with the following stops: Fredericksburg, Brooke, Leeland, Alexandria, Crystal City, L'Enfant, and Union Station. Any earlier and our contract with CSX would have to be amended. Fares would be the same as current VRE trains.

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**Bart from Fredericksburg** asks:

I want to do a Google search to see what the new engines look like. Can you provide the necessary info? Make, model, whatever is used to ID them.

**VRE Management:**

They will be MP36's which are currently being used by Chicago's Metra system. You can look at their website for a visual reference, but the livery (paint scheme) has not been decided on yet.

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**Marsha from Manassas** asks:

Problems in the new parking garage...the planners neglected to survey the monster trucks people drive. These folks park in the perpendicular spaces so they can back in, but the vehicles spill out of the spots with no less than the full front end and tire in the drive. When this is done it effectively accomplishes blocking views of other parked cars and reduces the drive lane to a single lane. Can something be done so they are made to park in the angle spots which are longer and in already 1 direction traffic, or if they don't fit there, made to park in the outdoor lot on the next block?

**VRE Management:**

I can look into the problem, but I don't think we can do much to deny large SUVs entry into the garage.

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**Mark from Fredericksburg, VA** asks:

Why is it so cold on the Fburg line in the mornings? I take 307 and have tried a number of different cars and they all seem to be blowing cold air on the highest possible setting. Is there anything the conductors can do to turn them down until summer is here?

**VRE Management:**

Our thermostats are set to operate between 68 and 72 degrees. However, the design of the HVAC system

constantly introduces fresh air into the coach so that the air doesn't get stagnate. This makes it seem a lot colder than it actually is.

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**Louis from Fredericksburg** asks:

Will there be any more stop add on the Fredericksburg line

**VRE Management:**

Right now, we are conducting environmental studies to see if a station can be constructed in the Cherry Hill area which is in between Quantico and Rippon stations.

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**Bob Burman from Spotsylvania** asks:

About one month ago in the New York they had a "No Pants" day on the trains. Is the VRE planning to do the same thing? I think it would be a lot of fun.

**VRE Management:**

Yes, we are! April Fools!

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**Denis from Manassas, VA** asks:

I rode the Manassas 326 train on Monday, March 30 that was 30 minutes late coming into Old Town. There was a message given over the intercom but it was too difficult to understand. Another passenger told me that we would be given a free pass. If that's true, how does one receive a free pass for a tardy train? Thanks ornisp@yahoo.com

**VRE Management:**

Our FRC (Free Ride Certificate) program offers riders a free ride if the train is an hour behind schedule.

Unfortunately, #326 on March 30th doesn't qualify. For more information please visit our website at

<http://www.vre.org/programs/freeride.htm>.

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**Fred from Rippon VA** asks:

Looking at the events of March 17th involving Train 307, it seems the communication problems were made worse, by the train entering service with a defective PA system. Does VRE have a minimum acceptable condition in which trains should enter service? Also who monitors Amtrak's maintenance of the trains, do you have anyone who audits their work?

**VRE Management:**

Under certain conditions, it is "acceptable" for a train's PA system to be out of service. If it is, the conductors are to walk the train and make the announcements. We conduct regular check of Amtrak's maintenance work, and one can see the results as we have reduced mechanical delays over the past year. However, we have had a recent string of failures lately and are looking into why they happened.

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**Mary from Springfield VA** asks:

When do the March 09 monthly tickets expire?

**VRE Management:**

Monthly tickets have a one day grace period for the first service day of the next month. Therefore, March Monthly Tickets are valid through today only.

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**Burke Station Rider from Fairfax VA** asks:

I was wondering if it would be possible if the train/station platforms could start providing coffee/snacks in the morning and/or evening? The extra revenue could go to the VRE and I would appreciate being able to grab a cup of coffee in the morning. Just a thought. Thanks, Burke Station Rider

**VRE Management:**

We had café service several years ago. Unfortunately, it did not generate any revenue.

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**Marvin from Fredericksburg, Va** asks:

Train 300 - will you ever get the public address system working? It is very difficult in the darkness to know the stops, there are no announcements, no displays, no conductors announcing the stops. Can't see the Station signs in the dark. This morning every stop was displayed as Rippon Landing, yesterday and most of the past weeks, no displays at all. Thanks

**VRE Management:**

I will look into the situation. However, I hear (no pun intended) that it is working on that train set in the afternoons.

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**Brian from Manassas Park** asks:

Does VRE have the same agreement with The Circulator bus service as they had with MetroBus? I used to show my VRE pass and ride the N22 for free, but now that route has been terminated by Metro and picked up by The Circulator.

**VRE Management:**

DC Circulator is now managed by the District and no longer accepts VRE or MARC tickets as transfers because we both use paper tickets. They only accept transfers from other agencies who can utilize the SmarTrip card.

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**Paul from Manassas** asks:

Is there any possibility of turning the lights down in some of the cars so we can sleep better on the way in/out of the city? You can turn them back on at each stop for safety reasons.

**VRE Management:**

Sorry, the coaches are "trainlined," meaning all the settings must be the same throughout the entire train. You are more than welcome to wear sleep masks while you ride the train, that should keep out the light.

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**Mohamed from Fredericksburg, VA** asks:

Tahya Tayeba wa baad, Hal honak auat khotat letwagod arabayat teeam? ao arabayat tadreebat ryadya?  
Shokran mokadaman, Mohamed Elgazzar

**VRE Management:**

I guess the April Fool joke is on me! if you want to resubmit your concern/question in English next month, I will try and answer it.

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**VRE Management:**

Wow! I ran a little long today . . .

I know many of you have been frustrated by the recent locomotive failures. I have talked with senior officials at Amtrak and our other locomotive maintainers to prevent any further catastrophic failures. You can't absolutely prevent problems, but we will do everything we can to minimize delays to your trips.

As many of you know, we are starting our Meet the Management series tonight at Union Station. They will occur every Wednesday at different stations until August 5th. While I won't be there tonight, I hope that you will stop by and talk with some of our staff.

Dale

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