

## Let's Talk!

The next VRE online forum will start on Wednesday, August 5th at 12:00pm.



There are currently 61 questions waiting to be answered.

**VRE Management:**

Thank you for joining me!

I can't believe that it's already August. I'm happy to report that we operated on-time over 90% in July with no mechanical-related delays.

Of course, that was offset by the delays we experienced last night due to a switch problem at L'Enfant. Hopefully, we won't have any more problems this month.

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**PM from Crystal City asks:**

Assuming that Spotsylvania joins VRE/gets a station some time in the next 25 years, what zone will it be in?

**VRE Management:**

It all depends on the location of the station, but it could be Zone 9 or Zone 10.

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**Alan from Dale City VA asks:**

I submitted this for the last 2 forums – it was not addressed. So I will get it in earlier this time. I've been doing some math. CSX says it can move 1 ton of freight 436 miles on one gallon of fuel. So, let's see how this translates for VRE. Assuming 10 passengers/ton, thus 1000 passengers on train 300 would be 200 tons. Using CSX numbers, 100 tons could be moved 4.3 miles on 1 gallon of fuel. Now, also assume from F-burg to Union Station is 50 miles. So, using CSX numbers it should take 23.2 gallons of fuel to move 1000, 200 pound passengers from F-burg to Union Station. And if fuel costs \$ 2.75/gal, it should cost VRE \$64 in fuel to move 1000 passengers from F-burg to Union. Care to comment?

**VRE Management:**

First, any question that doesn't get answered in the forum may be submitted to [gotrains@vre.org](mailto:gotrains@vre.org) where we answer all the emails. Unfortunately, we do not have specifics regarding how CSX came up with the metric you cite. This performance measure is intended to show how fuel efficiency has improved for their company over the years and how it is better than trucking cargo on the road. We suggest contacting CSX or the American Association of Railroads on how they arrived at that number.

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**Will from Fredericksburg asks:**

What is a track foreman and what are his duties? Does he have the authority to overrule the dispatcher?

**VRE Management:**

The track foreman is in charge of the track work going on in a particular area. He makes sure the work is getting done and also talks to passing trains in the work area and gives them permission to proceed, to protect his crew. He has the authority to stop trains through the area if he perceives a safety problem.

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**Bugged from Fredericksburg asks:**

You have GOT to do something about the flying insect problem on the cab car of train 300. That car needs to be taken out of service and fumigated. Twice.

**VRE Management:**

The insect problem is something that will likely never go away. We regularly spray the trains to get rid of them, however, since our trains travel through heavily wooded areas everyday, new insects find their way on the trains. Unfortunately, the cab car is the one most affected since it is in front. We are working to seal the spaces in the front cab door.

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**Steve from Burke, VA asks:**

I am concerned about your seemingly unhappy employees. In recent months, I find it rare that the majority of conductors smile at the customers or even say "please" or "thank you". Perhaps VRE has some money in the budget for customer service training or a refresher on basic manners? I think we are all looking for a pleasant trip.

**VRE Management:**

We conduct customer service training twice a year for our crews. We stress the fact first duty is to operate

the trains safely and efficiently, but also reiterate that they are the face of VRE. I know how simple gestures of smiles and saying "thank you" can improve customer service and will continue to emphasize those behaviors.

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**Kelly from Fairfax Station** asks:

I just returned from a month in Switzerland. I was incredibly impressed by the on-time record of their intercity and commuter trains. They literally performed to the second and if they were late by even a few minutes, conductors issued apologies in three languages. Why do the European trains do so well with on-time performance and our trains like VRE, MARC, etc. seem to struggle?

**VRE Management:**

These differences are often brought up when comparing systems. Europeans have a much different attitude towards public transportation that Americans do. The biggest difference is funding; much more money is given towards passenger trains in Europe than here. It is typical that the European state often owns the tracks on which the trains operate on, which is not typical of American passenger trains, where a majority of tracks are owned by freight companies operating for profit. Passenger rail systems across the world are not profitable from fare revenue alone. As a result, freight trains are more abundant on American tracks and share tracks with passenger rails and the two systems have different priorities. The two can coincide with one another but often results in congestion in both Europe and in America. Where Europe performs better at passenger rail, America is much better at moving freight on their tracks. Europeans admire our freight rail system and we admire their passenger rail system.

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**Steve from Burke, Va** asks:

What is the status of the extension of the Burke Station platform? When will it be completed? Will there be an additional entry from the platform into the garage? It looks like the platform extension is going to be really long! Thanks!

**VRE Management:**

The extension should be finished this Fall and will be 200 feet long. There will be no additional entrances/walkways from the garage to the extension.

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**Ed from Bealeton, Va** asks:

Are there any plans to extend VRE service further south into Fauquier County?

**VRE Management:**

There are no plans at this time.

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**Larry from Woodbridge** asks:

What was the reasoning behind it taking so long to get yesterday's switch issue resolved and trains moving? Seems interesting that the issue happened right around the time of the first trains home yesterday afternoon.

**VRE Management:**

The problem occurred because the bungalow that houses the switch and signal system overheated which caused the switch to fail. Getting a maintainer to the site during rush hour traffic prolonged the delay.

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**Gene from Dumfries, VA** asks:

I noticed in a number of places along the Fredricksburg line they are installing cement ties vs. the wooden ones. Are there plans for a higher speed trains on the CSX tracks.

**VRE Management:**

CSX is working to install a third track between Alexandria and Franconia/Springfield. The concrete ties are for the new switches that will be put in place for this project.

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**Davin from Woodbridge, VA** asks:

When will the Woodbridge construction project finish? VRE's website says July 2009, but it's August and not finished

**VRE Management:**

The project should complete no later than November 2009. We will update the web site.

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**David from Falmouth, VA** asks:

In the morning when significant delays occur, the stops at Leeland and Brooke are often skipped to help alleviate congestion and minimize crowding. So why is it that when afternoon trains get so far behind that they begin to fill up with the next scheduled train's passengers they continue to stop at the close in stations (Crystal City and Alexandria)? This only adds to everyone's delay as new passengers slowly squeeze in and detraining at subsequent stops must wade through packed aisles.

**VRE Management:**

During last night's service disruption because of switch issues south of L'Enfant, it was not possible to express any trains. We normally express trains when we know the next train will follow close behind. With the switch problems, the next train was likely to be significantly delayed. If it were possible, we would have expressed trains past Crystal City and Alexandria, which we have done in the past, to alleviate crowding and have the trains run faster during evening service.

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**Clark from Bristow, VA** asks:

Suggestion: either add or change one or two trains to be express trains from and to Broad Run. Broad Run already has a significant ridership. The express train(s) will fill by drawing Broad Run and some Manassas riders from the non-express trains. Another benefit is it gives the non-express trains more seats for riders further in to DC. These trains are so jamed packed, I think VRE is ready to put in an Express Train or two.

**VRE Management:**

I would love to add more train service! Unfortunately, the funding is not available. Changing current trains to express trains would only serve to alienate riders who regularly use the stations that would be skipped.

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**Pat from Fredericksburg** asks:

Would you please publish something again in Train Talk about people wearing too much perfume, aftershave, and cologne? When you have several individuals all in one car having something different on, it is hard to breathe. I often leave the train with a headache.

**VRE Management:**

Will do.

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**John from Manassas** asks:

How does the new ticketing policy catch people who are using counterfeit tickets when then conductors don't check for counterfeit tickets? To do this they would need to pick up and inspect each ticket every day. This ticketing policy sounds like a waste of time for honest riders who make a mistake and it doesn't enforce or catch those who are really cheating.

**VRE Management:**

Conductors are to do random inspection of tickets as they have other duties to ensure the safe operation of the train so they cannot check tickets everyday. However, conductors have caught riders with counterfeit tickets. But the random inspection of tickets and handing out of summons has resulted in higher fare revenues than actual increases in ridership, showing there are those who have thought again about fare evasion.

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**Jeff from Fredericksburg** asks:

Are you aware that many of the ticket machines are overwriting the date/time stamps or skipping spaces on the tickets? The overwriting makes it difficult to make out when the ticket was validated. This happens to me routinely at both the Fredericksburg and Crystal City stations. If the VRE is going to be strict about commuters validating their tickets then the validation machines should work properly. Thanks.

**VRE Management:**

I am aware of the problems. Our Fare Operations Manager tells me that the fare collection manufacturer is working on a solution. Unfortunately, the problems stem from more than one cause and it is not a quick fix. In the meanwhile, we are replacing the problem units with replacements as we get them from the manufacturer.

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**Ken from Fairfax** asks:

Why don't the conductors close the doors before putting the trains in motion? That would eliminate the safety concerns of people boarding or getting off moving trains. Frankly, watching the conductors stand in the open door as the train leaves for Manassas Park in the afternoon, I'm surprised at what I see. I don't hear of other lines running with such doors open.

**VRE Management:**

The conductors operate with the doors open at their location so that they can monitor the platform as the train departs. I agree that this may cause as many problems as solutions. I am looking into alternatives.

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**Yay from F'burg** asks:

What is the status of the express train for the F'burg line?

**VRE Management:**

I'm still working to make it happen, IF I can find the funding.

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**mike** from asks:

Is there a long term plan to move or eliminate the smoking section?

**VRE Management:**

No, because our platforms are open air.

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**Mary from Centreville, VA asks:**

I ride the 324 train in the morning and sit in the first car and have noticed the smell of cigarette smoke often especially right after L'Enfant Plaza and Union Station. Are the engineers allowed to smoke on the train? I didn't think anyone was allowed to smoke on the trains ...

**VRE Management:**

No smoking is allowed on board. Thank you for letting me know, I will follow up.

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**John from Manassas asks:**

330 has been really full recently. Any reason for the change? Also, bikes have been taking about 4 seats in the front. Isn't there a better place for them?

**VRE Management:**

According to our records, 330 is at about 78% capacity for July which is low for that train. Usually in the summer months, more people are on vacation. The only reason I could explain you seeing more people is maybe you notice more tourists on your train. About the bikes, those seats were designed to tether bikes to, so that is the best place for them.

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**Kim from Fairfax, VA asks:**

I think the emphasis on the enforcement approach to ticket validation by raising the size of fines and, presumably, by removing employees' discretion to issue fines is wrong-headed. This policy will discourage new riders and anger current riders who may occasionally forget to validate (we're all human, right?). The solution is to allow riders to purchase tickets on the train either directly from a conductor or, if you are averse to hiring more staff, from a vending machine on the train that dispenses single-ride tickets. Wouldn't this be better than angering riders and possible law suits?

**VRE Management:**

The law was changed by the Virginia General Assembly. While we don't like it, we must enforce it. I am going to work with the legislature in January to find a way to separate the serious infractions from the lesser offenses.

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**CHRISTINA from MANASSAS, VA asks:**

I just read your policy on tickets and I agree completely. Your August newsletter states that the conductors will not make any judgements on what excuses to accept or not unless discussed with the conductor prior to boarding such as (machine problems to validate, etc). Please inform your conductors also then that there should be a no tolerance rule for all then and they should not be making exceptions as I see the same repeat offenders. Thanks

**VRE Management:**

Thank you. I will continue to work with Amtrak to make sure that our conductors apply the law fairly.

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**Rick from Stafford asks:**

Aside from your job security, what would you consider to be the advantage of having VRE serve points south of Springfield, versus extending Metro to the commuter lots along the I-95 corridor (to Fredericksberg)?

**VRE Management:**

I think it would take a considerable amount of money to extend Metrorail to Fredericksburg. But, with all of the traffic in Northern Virginia, I think that there is a need for all modes of transit in this area.

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**Shannon from Alexandria, VA asks:**

If we forget our monthly pass, does the receipt of purchase still count toward a valid ticket?

**VRE Management:**

No, but a receipt will help if you lose your Monthly pass.

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**Nathan from Ladysmith, VA asks:**

When does the new afternoon Amtrak service to Richmond begin, and what impact will this have on VRE trains?

**VRE Management:**

We are working with the Amtrak, CSX and the Commonwealth to adjust our afternoon schedule to fit the train in. Once the schedule is finalized, we will let everyone know.

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**Greg from Rippon asks:**

Are Root Cause/Problem Analysis performed for situations such as yesterday's switch problem?

**VRE Management:**

Every time there is a delay, we analyze what happened and why. Then we replay the situation to see what we could have done better to minimize the delay and those findings help fine tune contingency plans next time a similar situation happens. Yesterday's root cause was the result of the HVAC system failing in the bungalow that houses the hardware that controls the signals and switches. The controls overheated, causing the railroad to operate with less automation. This means hand throwing switches and the dispatcher "talking" every train past each signal affected in the interest of safety.

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**Gary from Bristow, VA asks:**

What is being done to improve the safety and security of vehicles parked in the Broad Run parking lot? With all the increases in fares, it would seem that VRE could at least install 1 surveillance camera. Then they could post signs warning of surveillance as would be thieves entered the parking lot.

**VRE Management:**

We are working with Prince William County police to increase patrols of the lots. We are also having our security firm that patrols the train yard also go through the lots during the day. Additionally, we have applied for Homeland Security grants to add cameras.

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

What is keeping the trains from going 60+ mph? Especially between MP and Burke and Backlick and Alex.

**VRE Management:**

The Manassas Line has lots of curves that prevent trains from traveling at higher speeds. Trains have to negotiate the curves between these areas at slower speeds to safely operate.

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**Mike from Falmouth, VA asks:**

Why are there significantly more delays for Southbound (afternoon) trains than Northbound (morning)?

**VRE Management:**

Thank you. I'm glad you've noticed. Over the years our riders have expressed their concerns over the cost of being late for work. I have emphasized with the railroads the importance of our morning trains being on time. Now, I just need to work on the afternoon/evening trains.

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**William from Manassas Park asks:**

Don't you think the bike policy is a bit odd? If only two bikes can exist on a consist, what happens if you're on the last train and two bikes already exist? This policy sounds only like VRE pretending to be "green", but not actually doing anything about it.

**VRE Management:**

In order for there to be a simple uniform policy, we made it two bikes per train on certain trains. However, we have instructed the conductors that if they have room and the equipment on their train to accommodate more than two bikes to allow it. Typically, the last trains out have low ridership and should be able to do so.

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**Michael from Fredericksburg asks:**

Why does it cost \$122 to repair a cupholder? Now wonder our fares are going up. That's ridiculous

**VRE Management:**

When a cupholder is broken, it can not be fixed -- it must be replaced. In addition to the cost of the cupholder itself, there is quite a bit of labor involved. The seat back to which the unit is attached must be removed in order to mount the new cupholder.

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**Mark from Manassas, VA asks:**

How do I obtain a job that pays \$1300 to unclog a toilet?

**VRE Management:**

It is a dirty (and smelly) job that takes 10 hours to complete. But, if you want it, the job is yours

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**VRE Management:**

Well, our time is up! Thanks for submitting your questions. I always get a new perspective when I read through your comments.

Our next forum is scheduled for Wednesday, September 2. Talk to you then.

Dale

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