

## Let's Talk!

The next VRE online forum will start on Wednesday, December 2nd at 12:00pm.



There are currently 63 questions waiting to be answered.

### **VRE Management:**

Happy December! Can you believe the year is almost over? I trust everyone had a good Thanksgiving.  
On to the questions!

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### **Mike from Spotsy asks:**

Now that Spotsy has voted to join VRE, can we now park in the "members only" parking lots? Can we also get the cool "Members Only" jackets you guys wear when you ride the old rickety train cars from that era and before? Or can we look forward to all of those relics being consigned to the "bygones" bin soon?

### **VRE Management:**

Once Spotsylvania is officially a member jurisdiction, its residents can park in the members only lots. Parking shouldn't be a problem anymore once a station is built in the County. We are receiving ten more new Gallery cars next year, however, there will still be some older cars in regular rotation.

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### **Michael from Fredericksburg asks:**

Is there any talk about express trains from Fredericksburg/Leeland direct to L'Efant/Union Station? Then maybe some from other stops as well. The length of the ride is getting longer and longer each year.

### **VRE Management:**

I have included an express train similar to what you describe in the budget for FY2011. If approved it will start July of next year. We will let riders know when it is official.

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### **curious from manassas park, va asks:**

Following Monday's delays on the Manassas line, could you explain the process for deciding when to re-order trains (such as a Fredricksburg train coming before an earlier but delayed

Manassas train), and for deciding when to have a delayed train make all stops or express past certain stations.

**VRE Management:**

Every delay situation is different. On Monday, Manassas 329 had issues receiving its orders. Rather than delaying two trains, we operated 307 on-time. As for expressing trains, once a train is so delayed that is essentially on the next train's schedule, we usually express it past some stations to improve overall service. This not only diminishes crowding but improves spacing between the trains needed for the signal timing.

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**Alan from Dale City VA** asks:

I understand and applaud your decision to separate from Amtrak - sooner or later the gov't will stop subsidizing them. But did you have to replace them with a French company? What about 'buying American'?

**VRE Management:**

Any company was allowed to bid on the operating and maintenance contract. Keolis Rail Services America is an American company that will employ American workers for our service. It is true that it is a subsidiary of a French company but the money earned by employees to work our service will still circulate in the American economy.

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**Steve from Alexandria** asks:

Buying my December ticket today required two of your machines, three attempts to purchase and eight credit card swipes by four different credit cards before one of your machines finally accepted one of my CC's. Why is it that you cannot acquire machines at least of the 90's era that are more reliable than the time-wasting primitive antiques you now use?

**VRE Management:**

Sorry for your difficulty. Please send an email to [gotrains@vre.org](mailto:gotrains@vre.org) and say which machines were giving you trouble. This will help us pinpoint our focus. While these machines are less than 10 years old, constant use and exposure to the elements has taken its toll. Our technicians are constantly performing preventative and routine maintenance on them. We are in the process of procuring a new fare collection system.

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**Michelle from Stafford** asks:

I logged on at 9:00 for the Santa tickets. At 9:05 I was online with your office inquiring as they were showing all sold out. Your representative verified it to be the case. How could all the tickets be sold out so soon. How many were being sold online? I read somewhere that multiple orders from the same person would not be honored. Hopefully that is being enforced.

**VRE Management:**

This year a very limited number of tickets were offered online. We are enforcing the multiple order rule and there are still a few tickets left for the Manassas trains if you like to purchase some.

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**Al from Springfield, VA asks:**

I understand the VRE is expecting to get 5 new railcars in January. Do you have a date when you will get them? I would like to see them put on Train #304 ASAP.

**VRE Management:**

We are expecting 10 new railcars in January and while we still have some older cars in rotation, you should start seeing some more new cars.

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**Bill from Remington, VA asks:**

On Monday I was forced to ride 331. I was over 30 minutes late. I asked as told via the announcements as I got off the train. I was told they were out of tickets and to ask her in the morning since I ride 328. She was not on that train yesterday and I rode 329 as usual last night and was told they handed out FRCs the previous night. So what is the deal? Is there another way to get my FRC? Or am I just out of luck? If out of luck, why when all we ask of VRE is to honor its commitments just as you ask us to remember to validate.

**VRE Management:**

I know that the conductors on 331 handed out some FRCs. If you did not receive one, visit our website. The form can be found at this link <http://www.vre.org/programs/frc-request.pdf>

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**Tom from Manassas, VA asks:**

Not surprisingly, in view of the "seat notice," some of VRE's current train staff are trash talking the new contractor and openly predicting the new contractor will not meet their new recruiting goals. With this in mind and given Amtrak's large degree of control over operations at Union Station, what steps has VRE taken to ensure the contract switchover will not be a disaster for the riding public? What has happened to the ability of VRE to run trains on time on the Manassas line in the past few weeks?

**VRE Management:**

The transition to the new provider will be monitored closely by our staff. Commuter rail contracts have transferred from Amtrak to private companies in the past and those transitions ran smoothly. We will emulate those transitions so the passenger experience will be seamless.

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**Matt from Woodbridge, VA** asks:

Why is a fence being put up at the Woodbridge station? I don't see the need and it is in the way should a third track be installed in the future

**VRE Management:**

The fence is installed to prevent people from walking across the tracks. When a third track is installed, the fence will be removed.

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**Beth from Fredericksburg, VA** asks:

Is VRE going to offer the express train in the morning out of Fredericksburg starting at 5a.m? There was a discussion in the Free Lance Star back in the summer that this service would be offered in January????

**VRE Management:**

The express train is included in next year's budget which is effective July 1, 2010. The budget goes to VRE Operations Board this month and if approved we will start express service July 1.

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**Betty from Manassas, VA** asks:

Not a question, but a very positive comment. The improvements to the steps leading to the L'Enfant Plaza platform are wonderful. The crumbling edges of the steps were dangerous, and now they're nice and smooth. Thanks!

**VRE Management:**

Thank you. I am glad you like them.

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**Tom from Manassas VA** asks:

Ya, so, how about expanding more on your policy to **THROW AWAY ANY** food storage items **WHEN YOU FIND THEM**. I **LITERALLY** left my lunch pale with contents inside valued at about \$45. There was **NO** food inside of it. I literally asked the conductor the **VERY NEXT DAY** about it. He told me that he found it and turned it into lost and found. Your offices were closed at the time so I completed your online form and called your offices the next day they were open and told ya, it's your policy to **THROW THEM AWAY** when you get them. Your policy is unacceptable.

**VRE Management:**

The lost and found policy regarding food containers was established because of limited space and health concerns of food that has been sitting out for long periods of time. I will ask our staff to review this policy and make changes if necessary.

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**Dave from Lorton, VA** asks:

How much longer will VRE have to travel slowly between Alexandria and Springfield or should I say Metro's Van Dor Street station? I don't see any construction and it causes delays

**VRE Management:**

There is actually quite a bit of construction going on between Alexandria and Franconia/Springfield. CSX is building a third track between these two stations and while there may be minor inconveniences along the way, the long term capacity improvement will be well worth it.

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**ray from henrico, va** asks:

the fate of the third amtrak train northbound out of richmond in the morning seems to be tied to the progress of the #1 track project between franconia and alexandria. what is the timeline for completion of the replacement of the railroad bridges that take the rf&p subdivision over the ns tracks at casmeron run?

**VRE Management:**

The addition of a third Amtrak northbound out of Richmond is contingent on the completion of the replacement of the bridge at Cameron Run and the third track. Projects are to be completed by May 2010 at which time the Amtrak train will begin running.

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**Debbie O. from Broad Run, VA** asks:

You mentioned in an email about the catalytic converter thefts at Broad Run, but did you by any chance consider being pro-active about this and accelerating the enhancement of parking since it can extend all the way down to Piper Ln. In the fall and winter months the drive leading out to Piper Ln. can be very dark since there is no lighting and very dangerous.

**VRE Management:**

There is no overnight solution to the Broad Run parking situation. Prince William County has funded the design and environmental analysis for a parking garage. We will continue to search for construction funds. In the meantime, I can suggest you park at Manassas where there is plenty of available surface lot parking.

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**Bob from Woodbridge** asks:

Two items: (1) On PWCO maps, a VRE station is shown at Cherry Hill. Is this still being planned? (2) Conductors announce that it is either (a) a safety issue or (b) a violation of law to ride in the vestibules. Whichever it is, I strongly recommend that VRE post notices about this in the vestibules.

**VRE Management:**

There are environmental impact studies currently being done for a Cherry Hill station. Riding in the vestibules is not against the law, but is not safe for riders. We will look into providing signage for this.

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**JT from Crystal City, VA** asks:

Will the Amtrak step-up option remain available after Keolis begins operating VRE?

**VRE Management:**

At this time, we have no reason to believe Step-Up tickets to ride Amtrak will go away. I am also looking to Virginia to help subsidize some of the ticket as well.

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**Mary from Woodbridge** asks:

We're already hearing of crew going back to Amtrak. Does this mean that they will not be signing on with the new company? What's your expectation of crew moving over to the new company vs. having to hire green crews? Will service schedules be impacted by the lack of experienced crews?

**VRE Management:**

We'll know how many will move over to the new company in the February/March timeframe once union agreements have been established. No inexperienced crew will be hired. We will only hire experienced crew. Currently there about 10,000 furloughed engineers and conductors due to the downturn in the economy. Service will not be affected.

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**Manassas Rider from Manassas, VA** asks:

Will there ever be an express train on the Manassas Line?

**VRE Management:**

I don't have one planned at this time. The outcry for an express train has been much greater on the Fredericksburg Line.

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**tim from fredericksburg** asks:

i know people need there seeing Eye dogs, but what if people are allergic to dog or afraid of them. There should be some kind of warning telling people that there a dog on this train.

**VRE Management:**

Service dogs are well-trained animals that are taught not to attack other people. As for those who are allergic, my only advice is if you see one, you can move to another car.

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**Lakesha** from **woodbridge, Virginia** asks:

Can you transfer Smart Benefit card to a Smart trip card?

**VRE Management:**

I believe you can but since this is a Metro administered program, your best bet is to check with them.

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**TJ** from **Springfield, VA** asks:

Kind of strange questions...does VRE do period physicals on their engineers? What kind of safeguards are there in the event whoever is running the train becomes incapacitated?

**VRE Management:**

Train crew must report to their supervisors everyday to make sure they are fit for duty. There are many “fail-safes” designed into the railroad industry. One is commonly called the “dead man’s switch.” It is a mechanism that if not responded to, will stop the train.

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**Dawn** from **Fairfax Station VA** asks:

Train 224 on the Manassas line is turning in to standing room only. Will more cars be added to this train?

**VRE Management:**

There is no doubt the ridership on the Manassas Line has increased dramatically. We are planning on lengthening trains once we can open up some storage space. It won't be likely to happen in the next six months but we will keep an eye on the ridership of 324 and make adjustments when the time comes.

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**Cara** from **Broad Run, VA** asks:

While at Union Station, I was taking the 1:15p to Broad Run, the sign posting indicated which track the train would be on. There was a train on the opposite side. Several passengers were waiting for the Manassas Line train as well. The train opposite the indicated track was actually the Manassas Line train. Who is responsible for that?

**VRE Management:**

Amtrak dispatches trains within the Union Station terminal and are responsible for the information provided to passengers there. I will remind them of the importance of keeping these signs accurate.

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**Robert from Crystal City** asks:

Last week you promised that the larger trainsets would be used for the earlier trains on the day before Thanksgiving. For the early afternoon trains you kept your promise for the Fredericksburg riders as a trainset(301) with extra cars and many empty seats arrived in Crstal City. We Manassas riders were not treated as well as the early afternoon trainset (325) was not a large trainset and people were already standing in the aisles when it got to Crystal City and the result was severe overcrowding. This also happened last Thansgiving. Can we expect better treatment next year?

**VRE Management:**

Adding cars isn't as easy it seems. Instead we simply move around train set to accomodate the ridership. We always look at the ridership on these day from the year before and try to make our best determination of how to use the equipment. With over 5,000 people on four trains, we don't have trainsets to accomodate.

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**Mark from F'Burg** asks:

the supposed express train starting in July, 2010 - Will that include an afternoon express as well from Union Station or just a morning express?

**VRE Management:**

The addition of the morning express eliminates an equipment move that we have to do in the afternoon. So now we will have seven trainsets coming in the morning and seven trainsets leaving in the evening.

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**Jason from VA** asks:

Currently the 307 and 309 southbound trains for Fredericksburg trains are extremely crowded, often with only standing room only. How do we get additional cars added to the train, thus adding additional seating?

**VRE Management:**

All of our trains are getting more crowded than they already were. There is no more room to store longer trains in D.C. However, we have built some storage tracks at L'Enfant that will allow us to increase capacity. There is some more planning involved but we will have to stop some trains after L'Enfant to allow us to do this. By the way, a VRE staffer who rides 307 says there are seats at the south end of the train, last two cars.

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**Cindy from ManPark** asks:

Trains have been really crowded lately, any thoughts of adding another train in the morning or evening?

**VRE Management:**

Unfortunately there are no plans to increase service on the Manassas Line at this time.

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**Lee from Burke, VA** asks:

How do we obtain a FRC if the train is more than 30 mins late? None of the conductors ever mentions it.

**VRE Management:**

You can see the conductor on board to receive the FRC right away. If the conductor is unable to give you one at that time, please fill out a request form found at <http://www.vre.org/programs/frc-request.pdf>

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**Moi from Virginia** asks:

On the train this am, the conductor was saying that Amtrak will be forcing VRE to pay for access to its tracks north of the Potomac & will not allow VRE to park its trains at Union Station. Will there be a negative impact on service and will the payment of these fees to Amtrak lead to another fare increase? Did VRE consider the need for access to Amtrak property/facilities when negotiating the new contract?

**VRE Management:**

Our contract with Amtrak for access to Union Station expires on July 1, 2010. We are in the process of renegotiating access into Union Station and midday parking in the station as well. There is no indication that there will be any problems executing this contract.

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**John from Fredericksburg, Va** asks:

Ticket Validation Citations: Intentionally failing to validate a ticket is a crime, and should be punished. Absentmindedness thankfully is not NORMALLY a crime, but for some reason last July VRE made it one. Most conductors allow for the occasional "I forgot to validate my ticket" excuse and allow paying passengers to detrain at the next station and properly validate their tickets, but others stick to the 100% policy of issuing citations. My first question is which conductors are right and which conductor is wrong?

**VRE Management:**

John I see that you have asked a lot of questions about the ticket validation summons process. As I have said many times before on this forum, the General Assembly changed the law that made the process more cumbersome for everybody. I am actively working to get the law changed. In the meanwhile, I am still enforcing the zero tolerance policy because our conductors should not be put in the position of determining who is right and who is wrong. I still maintain that is for the judge to decide. I know it is not a perfect solution.

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**Ken from Fredericksburg VA** asks:

Is there any progress on plans to get some sort of Wi-Fi access on the VRE trains? The Verizon signals along the river are very low. This could be a fee based service, where commuters could purchase access to the system. Maybe it could be contracted out to a carrier, and VRE would be compensated.

**VRE Management:**

I always wanted to put wi-fi service on our trains once it became popular but I have not found a company that can provide continuous, reliable service along our tracks. Once that is solved, we will look into providing wi-fi access.

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**TSM from Alexandria, VA** asks:

Are trains permitted to depart stations EARLY? If not, what is the official VRE time-clock used by conductors? On several occasions, I have missed trains which departed 1-2 mins before schedule. This is according to the time on my cell phone, which I understand to be linked GMT time. Thanks!

**VRE Management:**

If there is an (L) listed next to the station on the schedule, the train is permitted to leave early. If there is no (L), then the train must wait for the scheduled departure time. These are reserved for later stops in the run when no one is expected to board anymore, i.e. L'Enfant during the morning commute. Our trains operate on USNO time, which may be different than the time on your phone. I always tell passengers to be early for their train to ensure they don't miss it.

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

Any chance you could put in vending machines (or sell rights to one of those food truck vendors) at the MP station? (Or other stations?) You might get a little more \$ towards VRE and silence the growling bellies on the train.

**VRE Management:**

Vending machines were considered once on our platforms but since our stations are unmanned, the threat of theft and vandalism is too great.

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**GaryF from Goldvian, VA** asks:

When is the Leeland Road lot due for resurfacing? The condition is deteriorating due to hot and cold stretching of the asphalt.

**VRE Management:**

I don't have an off the top answer for you . I know we are expanding Leeland by 200 spaces. It may be possible to do these two projects at the same time but it will not be until the weather gets warm again. I will look into it.

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**Mark from Annandale, VA asks:**

At the Rolling Road station lot, many vehicles back into parking spots, particularly along the front sidewalk leading to the platform. As a result, as much as half of the sidewalk is obstructed; the worst offenders are pickup trucks. Will VRE consider enforcing head-in parking and/or install concrete parking bumpers to limit the obstruction of the sidewalk? Thanks!

**VRE Management:**

I will look into this and see what we can do.

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**dk from Warrenton asks:**

I've noticed that some of the seats in the new cars already have cuts in the vinyl (specifically, this morning I noticed a couple of cuts in a seat in car 813A/Manassas). Will there be some on-going maintenance to repair these small cuts before they get bigger and lend our new cars the air of a delapidated diner, with seat cuts taped up with duct tape?

**VRE Management:**

To date, not many issues on tears, but we will replace the seat you mention. The tear will be repaired and put back into service when needed.

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**Paul from Manassas VA asks:**

What time does the night shift maintenance crew arrive at? Had a mechanical issue Monday morning on the 2nd train from Broad Run. Is there any personnel who come in before the train crew arrives to start up the engine(s) and perform a daily maintenance check?

**VRE Management:**

Maintenance crews regularly inspect the trains during the night shift to make sure they are ready for the next run. Unfortunately, not all mechanical problems can be caught before they happen.

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**Donna from Stafford asks:**

Any chance in the future that the Fredericksburg line trains would be able to run every 20 minutes rather than the current 30 minutes?

**VRE Management:**

Depends on some factors. This will not likely be the case on the Fredericksburg Line because of all of the train traffic, including Amtrak that operate in the same window that we do.

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

I recently reviewed the rates for riding the MARC in comparison to the rates for riding the VRE. To ride from Frederick MD to Union Station, a monthly pass is only \$175, whereas the monthly fees from Broad Run to Union Station are much higher than that. The mileage for the Frederick MD trip to Union station also exceed that of the Manassas run to Union Station. And of course, Fredericksburg costs even more than the Manassas line. The number of runs per day on the MARC trains appear to be equivalent to the VRE as well. Is there some reason why the VRE costs so much more?

**VRE Management:**

The biggest difference between VRE and MARC is the funding structure. As part of the Maryland Transit Administration, MARC is state operated and receives more subsidies from the state. VRE is owned by the local jurisdictions that it serve that also provides the subsidy. Although we receive state funding, it is not to the same degree that MARC receives funding from Maryland.

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**David from Alexandria, VA asks:**

For the past few day, the video monitors at Franconia-Springfield have been displaying the Windows Logon screen instead of the usual train status screen. As I[m sure you can imagine, the logon screen is utterly useless to VRE passengers. Is this communication system experiencing technical difficulties?

**VRE Management:**

I'll have the IT team check into and reset the screens.

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**Stephen from Burke, VA asks:**

Can you give us an update as to when we can expect to see new engines in operation? Thanks!

**VRE Management:**

The first will arrive July of 2010. Subsequent units will arrive after November 2010. They may arrive early, we'll let you know because we are excited, too.

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**MJBucci from Falmouth asks:**

Has the Leeland St. lot ever been considered as a candidate for a parking deck ? the commuters

who arrive for the last two morning trains have no other option but to park in the overflow lot. The end of that lot is approx 1/4 mile from the platform. See the rationale for my question ?

**VRE Management:**

My rationale for surface parking over deck parking is cost. It is three times as much per space for deck parking as opposed to surface parking. We will expand surface parking as far as we can before we consider a deck.

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**Ray from Fredericksburg VA asks:**

Since you can use the persons drivers license to validate age, why can't the regular VRE vendors sell the reduced fare passes for seniors?

**VRE Management:**

We needed to manage the selling of discount tickets to protect revenue. We will re-evaluate after a few months to see the impact on the sales and if we need to readjust the policy.

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**Virginia from Fredericksburg, VA asks:**

With all of the fussing about the half price tickets for handicap people, having pictures taken etc. I have not had one conductor ask to see my ticket or my picture.

**VRE Management:**

I will remind the conductors to check IDs when checking discount tickets.

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**VRE Management:**

Well the hour sure flew by. I want to wish you all a Happy Holiday season and we will see you after the New Year on January 6th.

-Dale