

Virginia Railway Express

Let's Talk!

The next VRE online forum will start on Wednesday, January 7th at 12 noon.



There are currently 63 questions waiting to be answered.

VRE Management:

Happy New Year!

I hope that you all are getting settled in after the holidays. I see a lot of questions about Inauguration Day and I will try to answer as many as I can.

Now, on to the questions!

Kevin from Fredericksburg asks:

What's the status on the express train from Fredericksburg to DC and back? You've previously said it was in the works.

VRE Management:

There had been plans for an express train. However, with the current funding situation, I don't know if we can ever put in place.

Doug from Burke asks:

I appreciate that VRE had to raise fares because of energy and other costs, and now must raise fares because higher fares may decrease ridership. However, that doesn't help me understand a basic question: What will VRE do differently to make service and fares steady and predictable?

VRE Management:

We are raising fares for items other than fuel, such as increased maintenance costs and rising insurance premiums. With all these rising costs, our member jurisdictions have told us they cannot increase their subsidies, due to their own budgetary concerns. In fact, the Commonwealth decreased our funding by \$1.2 million this year and \$1.6 million next fiscal year. Unfortunately, without dedicated funding, we have no real way of predicting revenue.

Kevin from Fredericksburg asks:

When will the new Gallery cars be back on the 308/311 set? I heard this was only temporary. It's been a while.

VRE Management:

There are still two new cars on the northern end of the train. It has been a few weeks and I hope to get the cars back in service soon.

AI from Springfield, VA asks:

What was the mechanical problem that Train #307 had on December 30?

VRE Management:

The independent brake valve on the lead locomotive failed. It was eventually replaced by mechanical forces about 30 minutes after Train 311 left that location.

Ed from F Burg asks:

I see from the Dec meeting minutes that CSX has said the rail line from Fred to DC will have to be re-railed. How often does this need to be done? For the last few years there have been a number of big projects (tie replacement, re-rail some of the curves). After each project to "upgrade" the line there always seems to be another project that needs to be done. Never-ending upgrades. Is there an end in sight, or is this a necessary evil because of the amount of rail traffic on the line?

VRE Management:

In order to maintain a safe railroad that permits rail traffic at an optimal speed, CSX must continue to implement these types of maintenance projects on a continual basis.

Peter from Burke asks:

Was the decision to use the "S" schedule during the entire holiday period a mistake or did I just imagine The I was standing on the way home because there was no seating available?

VRE Management:

The decision to run an "S" schedule over the holidays was made to save money. We typically see lower ridership (between 30-60% of our normal ridership) so it was justified to run less trains. Since this was the first time we did this, we were not able to predict which train would be in the highest demand. I made adjustments by adding cars to the sets that were seeing the overcrowding. We'll keep this all in mind next year.

Joey from Catlett, VA asks:

What is being done (outside of publishing VRE newsletter articles) to assist train riders who make honest mistakes (ie: accidentally riding out of their zone or a normal monthly rider forgetting ONE TIME to validate a 10-trip pass)? I realize that there are real cases of fare evasion, but is carte blanche sending every possible suspect to court the ONLY way to handle this situation? Thank you in advance for your time!

VRE Management:

I only ask two things to be able to ride our trains: 1) Be on the platform ready to board before the train is scheduled to depart and 2) Have a valid ticket. I realize that honest mistakes are made, but asking the conductors to be the judge puts them in a more difficult position.

Steve from Fredericksburg asks:

Thank you for operating on Inauguration Day - VRE will be a lifeline into and out of DC. Now a question: What kind of locomotives has VRE ordered? Freight, or those cool bullet-train-types like Sounder and Amtrak have?

VRE Management:

We have ordered MP 36 locomotives from MotivePower. They have a "rounded" nose.

DaGunny from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

I find it pure greed on VRE's CEO part that "special" tickets had to be issued slapping monthly ticket holders in the face and netting additional revenue for VRE. A "free" ticket could have been obtained by Monthly, 10-trip, and other valid ticket holders. I think that VRE should issue a \$25 credit to any valid ticket holders for that day. I also think the CEO needs to be replaced because since he took the job VRE has lost free Amtrak stepups and has not successfully negotiated this.

VRE Management:

Our budget for this fiscal year (finalized in Dec 2007) did not include service on Inauguration Day, but the Inaugural Committee asked us to, and I obliged. Therefore, the subsidies which pay roughly half of what it costs to run service is not being used towards Inauguration Day service. The special fare will pay to cover the costs to run the trains and the additional security that will be needed for the festivities. I have made free tickets available to Monthly Ticket holders. The Five-Day pass is programmed to skip Jan. 20.

Mark from Midland asks:

When will they fix the street lights on Piper Lane and the lights in the park lot at Broad Run.

VRE Management:

Thanks for letting me know. I'll look into it.

Gary Palmer from Greensboro, NC asks:

My check was deposited on December 26th. I have not received my tickets. Is there any way to know if they have been mailed or if they are lost?

VRE Management:

We began mailing tickets yesterday and all requests received through today will be mailed out by Friday.

Mike from Manassas, VA asks:

Do you recycle the newspaper in the blue receptacles at each station?

VRE Management:

We have contractors who are instructed to pick up the newspapers to bring to a recycling station.

John from Manassas asks:

With all the recent and planned rate hikes, how concerned is VRE on losing ridership. I know that I will be joining a carpool 2 days a week this year instead of taking the train.

VRE Management:

I am very concerned. This is the toughest financial time for VRE, local jurisdictions, the Commonwealth and federal government. With massive cuts to VRE funding at all government levels, the rider will be expected to pay more. The only other alternative to maintain current fare levels is to cut service which will I will continue to resist.

Rick from Manassas Park, VA asks:

VRE costs don't coincide with the reduced energy prices—energy prices are going down but VRE rates are going up. It was cost effective to ride the VRE, however with 2 price increases and the greatly reduced price of gas – it is now more cost effective to drive- cost is about half VRE costs;. The ridership appears to have greatly increased. When I began riding the VRE eight months ago seats were plentiful, but now the trains are full. With increased riders and increased rates, VRE appears to have it all! What about us(your last 6% increase is double my yrly pay % incr)? Will we see lower cost?

VRE Management:

While the price of gas has dropped significantly in the last quarter, it was rising steadily in the past three years, which depleted our mandatory monetary reserves. We have to replenish these reserves. In addition, we use diesel fuel on our trains, which has not dropped as low as gas prices. Finally, prices over the holidays started rising again, which proves the volatility of fuel. Unless I can guarantee the cost, I must create a budget that keeps the price of fuel higher. Regardless, I have instituted fuel saving measures and will look to hedge fuel prices while they are low.

Shawna from Manassas VA asks:

During the unfortunate times when the train is excessively delayed en route for an extended period of time (i.e., 1 or more hours), can a standard emergency plan be instituted within the mass transportation system to provide transportation to the nearest metro or bus terminal, or directly to riders' home VRE station? Having a standard operating plan would alleviate a lot of anxiety for VRE riders and will then enable them to establish action plans for themselves with family members.

VRE Management:

There is a standard operating procedure for responding to significant delays. However, there are a number of variables that need to be kept in mind. When at all possible, we will usually couple the next train to the disabled train and push it to its final destination. If this is not possible, we will transfer to the next train. Our last option is to call for buses since they can take up to two hours to arrive -- especially during rush hour when the buses are

already in use.

Cheryle from Atlanta, Georgia asks:

I just purchased 6 VRE tickets from Union Station to Woodbridge. I intended to use them to leave DC on Inauguration day. Now I see that there are special Inauguration Day Tickets. How do I get a refund for the tickets I just purchased and order the correct ones for inauguration day travel?

VRE Management:

Please call our office at (703) 684-1001 for information on getting a refund OR visit http://www.vre.org/service/buyval.htm#Ticket_Refunds on our web site for a Ticket Refund request form.

Todd from Bristow, VA asks:

Why has train 331 (the 5:00 pm Manassas Line from Union Station to Broad Run) only been equipped with restrooms in the last two cars for the last few months? Shouldn't the train be configured with at the very least w/ a restroom up front and one in the back? Having a restroom available only at the back of the train is *extremely* inconvenient. Other trains seem to have an abundant number of cars w/ restrooms, so I can only assume that the current configuration of train 331 is an oversight. I'm hoping that this can be fixed. Thanks!

VRE Management:

I will have the train reconfigured as soon as possible.

Hattie Angel from Jacksonville, NC asks:

I will be staying in Quantico, Va. How can I commute from Quantico to Washington to attend the inauguration. What is the best mode of transportation and where can I park to take the bus or rail?

VRE Management:

We have a rail station located in Quantico and are offering special Inauguration Day service. More details can be found on our web site at <http://www.vre.org>.

Ken II from Casanova asks:

Who's going to stop me from using my 10 day trip ticket to ride on Inauguration Day? Can't keep a good man down!

VRE Management:

January 20th will NOT be a normal service day. Due to expected crowds, there will be VRE staff, security and local police at every station to check tickets on the platforms. I highly suggest that you buy an Inauguration Day ticket.

Maureen from Woodbridge asks:

How late will VRE be operating on Tuesday night? Will it be later than normal so that events in the city can be attended, such as the Inaugural Ball?

VRE Management:

Our last train will be departing Union Station at 6:50pm. Please review the complete details available on our web site at <http://www.vre.org>.

Robert from Virginia asks:

During the Fall of 2008, the VRE trains were delayed due to "leaf oil" on the tracks. I never heard of this issue before I moved to Virginia. Is this condition unique to this area? Is there a remedy available that would prevent this condition and alleviate the unscheduled delays?

VRE Management:

No, this is not unique to Virginia. It is a problem worldwide and was covered by the Wall Street Journal in Fall 2006. For VRE, part of the problem is this particular stretch of track that goes up a hill through a wooded area. At

present, there is little that can be done by our host railroads to alleviate the problem.

Deb from SpotsyFred asks:

When will the new schedules be out?

VRE Management:

You can visit our web site right now to see the new Fredericksburg schedule. Please note that the printable schedules are not updated yet, but hope to have them by the end of this week. Pocket schedules are available on the trains now.

Kevin from Fredericksburg asks:

One more question, do you know what happened to Amtrak 93 on Monday (1/5)? I arrived at L'Enfant at 5:50pm ready to "step up" and it never arrived. (At least not before VRE 311, which I ended up taking.)

VRE Management:

We cannot track Amtrak trains the same way we do with our own service. I suggest you call 1-800-USA-RAIL anytime you plan on riding an Amtrak train.

Phil from Burke Centre asks:

With the recent fare increase and future ones coming, VRE will no longer be (and isn't now) considered "public transportation." \$10-20 per day round trip is crazy.

VRE Management:

VRE is still considered public transportation since over half of our operating costs are borne by federal, state and local funding. While the portion you pay may seem high, the reality is it could become if public funding continues to decrease.

Bob from Crystal City asks:

I understand the wisdom of going to an S schedule for the holiday period. My only issue is why "larger train sets" were not used for the early trains on the 24th. Even though ridership was way down on the 24th, the early trains were totally packed. Is it possible for VRE to use the larger train sets for the early trains on the afternoon before major holidays? Those early trains are always overcrowded, and uncomfortable as a result. Thanks

VRE Management:

On the days before holidays or long weekends, we usually put the longest trains on the first evening trains since that time is when we typically see the most riders trying to get home. Usually the mid-day trains are big enough to accommodate, and it was for the Manassas Line, but not the Fredericksburg Line. That is something we will note for next Christmas Eve.

Bob from Manassas, VA asks:

Thanks for the "free" Inaugural Day ticket for monthly ticket holders. I work as a contractor to Amtrak (work near Union Station) and an "all hands on deck" policy was recently announced for that day. So getting to Union Station was not optional for me. You made it easy...I think!

VRE Management:

My pleasure. I have to work that day, too!

Bob from Manassas, VA asks:

When will the tickets for Inauguration Day for monthly ticket holders who applied for them be mailed out? Thanks.

VRE Management:

We will begin mailing the tickets for the monthly ticket holders on Jan. 12.

Dennis from Lorton asks:

When will you increase the capacity of train 304 and 309. It is always packed and standing room only in the vestibules. Thanks

VRE Management:

I'll keep an eye on it. If the trend continues, I'll see what can be done.

Mary from Manassas, VA asks:

Will the new locomotives be able to move at faster speeds?

VRE Management:

The rails which we operate on have a maximum speed (70mph) which trains can safely operate, but the new locomotives will accelerate faster.

Mike Morrill from Bristow, VA asks:

Is it too late to mail in requests for Inauguration Day train tickets?

VRE Management:

No, but hurry, if you want to be able to get your ticket before Inauguration Day.

Jessica from Broad Run asks:

. First, I really appreciate VRE's service and couldn't of a better way to get to work. However, this morning I truly experienced Broad Run's parking problem. Its not just an inconvenience, its a life and safety issue. Usually I take 322 or 324, so don't see the extent of the parking problem, but went in late today. I arrived at BR 20 minutes before 330's departure and discovered the fun of parking down Piper Ln. Cars are speeding down the road, there is no sidewalk, got bumped by a moving car, slipped on the mud twice, and just missed 330 WHILE I WAS ON THE PLATFORM. I never made it to work and have a newly validated 5 day pass that I didn't use today. . I arrived in what I thought was plenty of time (20 min) and never dallied. Veterans of the later trains are probably laughing, but it is a pure safety issue and its amazing that no one has gotten severely injured or even killed walking along the road from Piper. MP/MC is not an option for those of us out of the district

VRE Management:

I have talked to Prince William County about putting a parking structure there, and while not opposed to it, it will take more convincing.

Bob from Burke Centre asks:

Last year I sent an email about the new coach cars not removing condensation on the interior windows during rain/snow and cold weather, with water dripping down them onto the wall and seats. VRE's response was that they were working with the manufacturer to rectify the problem. Well, here we are a year later and it is still a problem. Passengers are putting paper napkins at the bottom of the windows to absorb the water. Not good for the window seals, as they are beginning to mildew. Not good for mildew in general - as the coaches will eventually have a mildew problem.

VRE Management:

We are experimenting with different set ups on four different gallery cars to try and find a solution. The situation occurs when its cold and damp outside and what we have to do is cause the air conditioning to come on in the rail car when the heat is operating so that the A/C will evaporate the moisture. The trick is not to make the car any colder while dehumidifying the air -- not easy to do.

Isabella from Washington DC asks:

If we are two hours late, why do we not receive 2 free tickets?

VRE Management:

If you are two hours late, you still only encounter one delay. Therefore, you only receive one FRC.

Larry from Fredericksburg asks:

VRE sends trains that aren't occupied back and forth during the day to make return trips. Why doesn't VRE add them to the schedule as express trains? Ridership may be scarce, but the option would be there for occasional use by other than your normal commuters.

VRE Management:

On the Manassas line, they are scheduled as limited stop reverse flow trains. However, the one reverse flow train on the Fredericksburg line can not carry passengers as a result of an agreement with CSX.

John from Bealeton asks:

How can Monthly ticket holder get these free ride tickets for the 20th of Jan.

VRE Management:

Visit our Inauguration Day web page for details <http://www.vre.org/Inauguration09/main.html>. The link for Monthly ticket holders is located at the bottom of the page. There are still plenty of tickets available.

Rob from Bristow asks:

Good Morning, On many occasions, I have observed people talking loudly on their cell phones for the entire ride to work. It is very disrespectful to other riders and many of us have missed announcements from the Conductor. I would like to know what the rules are on Cell Phone usage and the best way to handle a situation like this.

VRE Management:

Cell phones are allowed to be used on our trains, outside of the quiet car. We remind riders to be mindful while using their cell phones, but there is little else we can do.

Bob from Woodbridge asks:

Just want to say that even with the rising costs, I still prefer to sit on a nice clean train with my coffee and newspaper and wave at the folks parked on I-95. Keep up the good work.

VRE Management:

Thank you for the compliment. The ability to read the newspaper or get some work done while commuting is certainly a big benefit. For some, it's priceless.

Carl from Lorton VA asks:

Have enough tickets been sold on the inauguration trains to make money?

VRE Management:

We expect the fare from the Inauguration Day Tickets to cover the cost of running trains and the extra security needed since subsidies from the jurisdictions will not be used because service for this day was not budgeted for.

Matt from Burke,VA asks:

What efforts are being made to lobby for funding from the 1 Trillion Dollar Stimulus package that is heavily tilted toward infrastructure improvement? It stands to reason that VRE should be getting some of that money. Thanks

VRE Management:

We have already agreed to purchase five new locomotives with options for fifteen more. I have applied for funds to exercise the option for 15 additional locomotives.

Mary from Stafford, VA asks:

When will Train 304 have all new cars instead of the first few cars being new and the rest being the older models?

VRE Management:

We purchased new Gallery cars to replace the Kawasaki coaches we sold to Maryland and expect to get them by

March 2010.

Richard from Dumfries, VA asks:

When will those of us that submitted for Inauguration Train tickets know whether or not we will have a seat. I have to work that day and need to confirm my transportation plans soonest.

VRE Management:

We started mailing the tickets we have processed yesterday. A true confirmation would be getting the ticket in the mail. However, it is safe to say if your check has cleared, then you will be getting a ticket.

Deb from Spotsy asks:

How are we supposed to get to and from the commuter lot on Jan. 21st if we have to remove our vehicles from the parking lots?

VRE Management:

Overnight parking will only be restricted from Friday, Jan. 16th, after service is done until after service on Tuesday, Jan. 20th. After that, everyone is free to use the lots for overnight parking. With many buses expected on January 20th, we want to give them room to maneuver.

Debbie from Broad Run, VA asks:

Since we are in the time of year when the when the sleet, freezing rain and snow could appear at anytime, I was wondering if VRE has any plan in place to provide salt or sand to the parking lots when these particular conditions are predicted in advance? The parking lots can be very dangerous and slippery and send someone flying and possibly hurting themselves.

VRE Management:

Every year, our Manager of Facilities get together with all parties involved for snow removal/treatment. They do a table-top exercise where various scenarios are run through so everyone knows what they are responsible for. When snow or ice is predicted, the teams are up at all hours monitoring conditions to execute the plans. However, many of the lots are maintained by VDOT or the local jurisdictions, and they are responsible for the snow and ice.

Manassas from Manassas, VA asks:

Will the ticket vendor at Holiday Inn (L'Enfant) Casey's still accept the metrocheck? If so, for how long? Will Casey's accept the new form of smartbenefits voucher?

VRE Management:

All of our vendors will accept Metrocheks until March 6, 2009. Until then, if you encounter difficulty using your Metrocheks, let us know so we can address it. All of our vendors are currently accepting SmartBenefits vouchers.

Brenda from Woodbridge, VA asks:

Will the 5-day tripper tickets be adjusted for the two days the trains will not be running (1/19-20/09)?

VRE Management:

Yes. For example, if you validate the morning of Friday Jan.16, it will skip over Jan. 19 & 20, and be valid until Monday, Jan. 26.

ME from NOW asks:

Have we started yet

VRE Management:

Yes. -- In fact, I have gone over the usual hour and with that, I am done for today.

VRE Management:

Well, time really flew by today! There were a lot of great questions and I really wanted to answer all of them. Unfortunately, I have run out of time. I will chat with you again on our next forum on February 4th. Until then, I hope you have a memorable Inauguration Day.
Dale

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