

# Virginia Railway Express

## Let's Talk!

The next VRE online forum will start on Wednesday, July 1st at 12:00pm.



There are currently 69 questions waiting to be answered.

### **VRE Management:**

Thanks for joining me! I've only had a couple of minutes to look at the questions, but it seems that there are some good ones. So, let's get started!

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### **PM from Crystal City asks:**

The intersection of Charles and Frederick Streets in Fredericksburg is always a dicey proposition for us to cross as we walk to the station in the morning or to Lots G & H in the evening. Some frustrated drivers get sick of watching long chains of commuters go by as they sit there waiting, and I've seen them dangerously gun it through the intersection in a reckless manner. It's only a matter of time before someone gets run over or killed. Can you talk to the City of Fredericksburg to have them install traffic lights and crosswalk lights at this intersection?

### **VRE Management:**

Thanks for the suggestion. I will talk to the City to see if they can do something about the situation.

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### **Tom from Lorton asks:**

Is anyone allowed to ride the VRE for free?

### **VRE Management:**

Non-uniformed law enforcement officers who participate in our "undercover" security program and full-time VRE employees may ride for free.

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### **Esther from Fredericksburg asks:**

Please explain the rationale/rule, when a VRE breaks down as it did yesterday, for allowing passengers to board Amtrak 86 without a step-up ticket when there are passengers who boarded earlier who did pay the step-up. An explanation, please, not some glib retort. Thanks.

### **VRE Management:**

When it was discovered that we needed to get riders off of #306 on Monday, Amtrak agreed to take #306's passengers onto Amtrak 86 when it stopped at Quantico. Since #306's riders did not intend to ride an Amtrak train and this was an unusual situation, Amtrak agreed to make an exception for those riders transferred from #306. No exception was made for those who planned to ride Amtrak 86 since they originally intended to use the cross-honor service.

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

Do the conductors, etc. that are leased out from Amtrak rotate between Amtrak and VRE or is it a "permanent" lease of employees? Thanks.

### **VRE Management:**

Crew members contracted from Amtrak may rotate in and out of VRE service when positions come available, or the jobs are "up for bid."

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**Shannon from Alexandria, VA** asks:

If my normal ride is from Manassas park to Alexandria, what is the protocol for the rare trip into DC in the morning for a meeting? Do I pay for Alexandria to DC and buy a separate fare ticket? Thanks

**VRE Management:**

Since fares are based on zones of travel, the easiest solution would be buy additional single-, or two-trip tickets for those days you travel to Washington. As your normal ride is zones 6-2, you would need to get additional tickets valid for travel in zones 6-1.

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

What is the delivery status of the MP36 locomotives?

**VRE Management:**

The first locomotive will be delivered in July 2010. the next five will arrive in the Fall of 2010.

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

Are there any plans to get rid of those old Metra bi-level cars and go to all Nippon Sharyo cars?

**VRE Management:**

By this February we will have 71 new gallery cars and we will retain 30 of the older rail cars.

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

I would like to see No Smoking signs put near the steps leading to the main station platform on the South-end. Smokers gather near those main steps and smoke because they do not want to go to the North end of the platform. They want to ride either the Quiet Car or one of the cars near the South-end of the train. Non-smokers must wade through smoke to gain access to the newspaper racks and the platform.

**VRE Management:**

Thanks for the suggestion. I will talk with our Facilities Manager and see what we can do.

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**Russ from Fredericksburg, VA** asks:

Ordinarily, VRE doesn't give me much to complain about, but... How did the question of train ticket validation get before the Virginia General Assembly? Were the existing penalties for violators so inadequate? Was it necessary to up the ante? This looks like overkill and lack of forethought. I can see some people getting dragged into court, for making honest mistakes, that should be corrected by lesser means. For the other riders, don't believe it couldn't happen you.

**VRE Management:**

We did ask the General Assembly to create a specific infraction for counterfeit tickets. Rather than creating a new code, they opted to lump the new infraction into the existing code.

However, it still stands that you must validate your ticket before boarding. This new law underscores the seriousness of riders paying their fare share.

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**MarK from Fburg, VA** asks:

I read the article in the Free Lance Star stating that the express train option will not happen unless Spotsy joins the VRE! Is this true? I was under the impression the express was only waiting for the completion of a storage track at LeEnfant station?

**VRE Management:**

That's not true. Spotsylvania does not have to join so that we can operate an express train. We will add an additional train when the state adds another Richmond to Washington train after December 2009.

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**James from Manassas, VA** asks:

What controls the automated messages announcing upcoming stations? Is there a relay box on the side of the tracks?

**VRE Management:**

The messages are controlled by wheel turns. There's an on-board computer that uses the number of wheel turns to determine the train's location and play the appropriate announcement.

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**David from Gainesville VA** asks:

I've noticed that on the day before a holiday, many riders choose to go home on the earliest 2 trains. Unlike the Fredericksburg line, the Manassas train often isn't longer despite the fact that people leave early on the day prior to a holiday, and, for that matter, on most Fridays. Could you add more cars based on your database records of ridership? Thanks.

**VRE Management:**

You will be happy to know that the first rush-hour Manassas (train #327) and Fredericksburg (train #303) trains will have more cars on each set tomorrow.

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**Todd from Bristow, VA** asks:

Who maintains the landscaping around the Broad Run station? There's a nice-sized Poison Ivy plant climbing out of the first boxwood shrub nearest the ticket machines. I've brushed it twice - but luckily I wear pants. I wonder how many people in shorts or skirts have awakened the next morning with a mystery rash?

**VRE Management:**

Thanks! I'll take care of it.

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**Greg from Woodbridge** asks:

Sure seems like June has been a bad month for on time performance. There have been a lot of freight train breakdowns and slow freight trains of late...is CSX Disptach doing something different? Or are there just more issues?

**VRE Management:**

Our on-time performance for June on the Fredericksburg line was 85%. This is not where we want it (90%+). There were a variety of issues in June that we will continue to work on.

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

What is the current status of switching to SmarTrip cards?

**VRE Management:**

Unfortunately, we are still on hold for using SmarTrip. We would like to incorporate SmarTrip cards into our fare collection system.

However, VRE's fare collection system is not compatible with the one being used by Metro which is spearheading a regional fare system. Once certain specifications for the regional fare system have been put into place, we can begin to evaluate the most effective way to accept the cards.

We will either modify our existing equipment or wait until new equipment is procured. In the meanwhile, our riders can use the options listed on our web site at <http://www.vre.org/service/sbvouchers.htm>.

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**Billy Green from Burke, VA** asks:

I continually hear differences on the proper queuing process. Are we to wait until the train comes to a complete stop at our station? Or do we begin queuing as the train leaves the station prior to ours? Please clarify.

**VRE Management:**

To minimize any confusion and help prevent riders from being carried by their stop, passengers should not begin

lining up to exit until the train leaves the station just before the stop you intend to use.

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**Ralph from Burke** asks:

The conductors do not consistently announce that some coach doors will not open at the next station (i.e., 331 at Burke Centre, and other trains). Not a problem for me as a regular, but this is tourist season. I have seen them waiting at the non-opening door and tell them to move up a car or two. I don't know if anyone misses a station, but they shouldn't be in the situation due to lack of a two sentence announcement.

**VRE Management:**

Thanks for suggestion! I'll see that the crews are reminded about this.

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**Ed from Fredricksburg** asks:

Are there any plans to display one of the new locomotive at Union Station just like you did when the new cars started arriving.

**VRE Management:**

Yes.

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**Misty from Quantico** asks:

I have a ticket that still has 2 rides left but the machines wont read the ticket. What should i do.

**VRE Management:**

Send the ticket along with your name, home address, daytime phone number and a brief explanation to:

VRE

Attn: Validation Errors

Suite #202

Alexandria, VA 22314

A replacement will be sent to you within three business days of our receipt of your request.

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**Brian from Rippon** asks:

My name is Rippon, and my parents, the VRE, ignore me and only pay attention to my brother Woodbridge. They get a kiss and ride, but we still have a graffiti problem and a leaky roof.

**VRE Management:**

Sweet, little Rippon we love you as much as we love your big brother Woodbridge. In fact, we love all of our children equally. We are waiting for a CSX flagman to become available so that our crews can safely remove the graffiti. We will take a look at the leaky roof, too.

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**Margaret from Fairfax, VA** asks:

Just would like to say how generally great the conductors are on the trains and how comfortable the ride is. I had to drive up to Silver Spring during the issue with the Metro Red Line and I am very happy to be back on the VRE. Thanks for the service.

**VRE Management:**

Thanks for the comment. We're glad to have you back.

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**AI from Lorton, VA** asks:

What is the construction going on south of Franconia/Springfield causing trains to go very very slow in this area?

**VRE Management:**

CSX recently installed some concrete ties in this area as part of the project to bring a third track from Alexandria to Franconia/Springfield.

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**June from Fredericksburg** asks:

What is the policy regarding people who hog seats with their luggage and conductors who ignore it?

**VRE Management:**

If you speak to a conductor and he/she does not ask the rider to stow their belongings appropriately, please note the conductor's name (or get a description), date and train number and submit a Personnel Comment Form found on a web site at <http://www.vre.org/feedback/comments.php>.

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**Greg from Woodbridge,VA** asks:

What is the smoking policy on the platforms at Union Station? I can't seem to find a spot on the platform where there isn't a smoker around.

**VRE Management:**

The Union Station platforms are unusual cases in the fact that they are not owned by VRE. As a result, they are subject to the smoking policies put into place by Union Station. Unfortunately, I don't have a solution for you.

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**Stephen from Falmouth, Va.** asks:

There seems to be a long delay in sending out Railtime updates. Messages are not sent out timely, or are received hours after an event has happened. I wouldn't call this realtime communication. Doesn't do any good to tell me at 6:30 a.m. that train 300, which leaves Fredericksburg at 5:15 a.m., is late. It's gone by that time. Something is wrong.

**VRE Management:**

There are a number of reasons why this may be happening to you. One may be the way that your account is currently set up to receive messages. Please call 703-684-1001 and ask to speak to someone in Customer Service about your Train Talk account.

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**RHG from Manassas** asks:

Is there anyway VRE could make the Quiet Car signs more noticeable. Last week on the 332 train from Broad Run there were only a few signs in the back of the car. There were issues with passengers talking loud or using their cell phones unaware that they were seated on the quiet car. Other passengers had get up and tell them that they are not allowed to use their cell phones. This is quite disruptive to others on board

**VRE Management:**

I'll see if we can change the size of the signs or maybe make them more noticeable.

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**Jeff from Manassas** asks:

Will VRE consider changing their smoking policy now that more and more states are banning smoking in more and more public places?

**VRE Management:**

Since most of our platforms are open air facilities, we can not eliminate smoking on these platforms. The only way we can address this is to limit smoking it to the northernmost 100 feet.

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**Tony from Burke, VA** asks:

What is the status of the bike racks at the Rolling Road Station?

**VRE Management:**

As with most of our stations, the locality in which the station is located owns the parking lots and property outside of our platforms. In your case, Fairfax County removed the old racks and is working to put newly designed ones at this station. I do not know what progress has been made. I'll check with the County.

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**DEB from Spotsy** asks:

Why is it that I buy my monthly ticket but cannot get a seat in the evenings for at least two stops. Do you not count the number of tickets sold?

**VRE Management:**

Since VRE is a commuter service and we are not set up to reserve seats, a ticket only guarantees you a ride, not a seat. As most of our trains are not regularly standing room only, you may wish to look for a seat in another rail car, or speak to a conductor about where seats may be available in other parts of the train you regularly ride.

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**Concerned Riders from Fredericksburg** asks:

What's up with the numerous brake issues here lately? Is it the same set of cars or is it all of them? Do you think it's time to get some real work done on the brakes before we have issues like Metro?

**VRE Management:**

VRE's brake system is designed to "fail safe." So, when we have brake issues, the brakes are fully engaged and will not release. Any time one of our trains experiences problems with brakes the train comes to a stop.

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**John from Manassas, VA** asks:

When will the spalling on the steps be fixed at Manassas Park? Safety Issue.

**VRE Management:**

My Facilities Manger tells me that work was recently completed on the stairs at Manassas Park. That said, he also tells me that he is going to inspect the work by the end of this week. Any warranty issues should be resolved by next week.

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**Larry from Quantico** asks:

Can you go over again the reasons for Heat Restrictions as well as the different policies for them by CSX and NS?

**VRE Management:**

This is a multi-part question that can best be answered by reviewing the detailed explanation found in the Feedback section of our web site under Frequently Asked Questions. Please check out the last section of questions available on the web at <http://www.vre.org/feedback/faq.htm>.

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**Brian from Manassas, Virginia** asks:

Thank you for the ability to track VRE trains on handheld PDAs. I use it almost every day -- especially since I'm often late for my train! I would absolutely appreciate it if you could make the the map showing WHERE THE TRAINS ARE appear FIRST!! It takes too long for all that administrative messaging to appear before we can (and unfortunately MUST) then roll the Blackberry down to see where the trains are. That requires a screen refresh -- which therefore takes even more time before you can get to the information you are looking for. Thanks much for anything you can do on this! Brian

**VRE Management:**

Glad to hear that you are making use of Rail Time on your PDA. We are working to make our web site mobile friendly. In the meantime, you can press the letter "B" on your keypad to reach the bottom of a web page.

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**Scott from Burke** asks:

What is the actual (estimate is fine) annual cost associated with adding an extra train to the manassas line? I know 'there is no money' is always the reason cited...but with many costs being fixed (such as trains u already have, staff being paid now at VRE HQ, etc) I am really curious -- what adding another train say a 3:30 PM, and backing each other train off maybe 20 minutes later would be?

**VRE Management:**

The cost is about \$1.1 million per year. If we get our normal loads on that train, we can recover about half the cost in fares over the course of the year. So, the net cost is about \$500,000. Other issues we must resolve are permission from CSX and NS to add a train on the Manassas Line and also the extra storage and equipment needed to operate the extra train.

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**Bill from Burke asks:**

After reading the new Virginia code on tickets I'm wondering if I should ride VRE. Rising is too risky. Risk is likelihood times impact. The likelihood is there -- I'm at the age where sometimes I forget things. The law raised the impact to a severe level. It sounds to me like riding VRE just became a poor fit for me. It's too bad, really. I've been riding since 1992, and paid you all consistently. I'm sorry that now I have to leave, particularly since the reason is that you've made your service unfriendly to us older and more forgetful -- yet well intentioned -- riders.

**VRE Management:**

Bill, I understand what you are saying. But, do you forget to put money in the parking meter when you park in a metered space?

I am not asking you to be perfect, but forgetting to have a valid ticket has consequences. As a long-time rider, you should understand my position on this.

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**VRE Management:**

Our time is up.

Happy 4th of July to you all. Remember we will not be operating this Friday (July 3).

See you next month -- August 5th.

Dale

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