

## Let's Talk!

The next VRE online forum will start on Tuesday, November 3rd at 12:00pm.



There are currently 50 questions waiting to be answered.

### **VRE Management:**

Thank you for joining me on this special Tuesday edition of the On-Line Forum. It is Election Day and if you didn't vote before you came into work today, we have reminded our host railroads of the importance of getting you home today in order to exercise your right to vote. Now on to questions!

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### **Tim from Fredericksburg asks:**

I saw where MARC is going to start having security guards at their stations who will be randomly searching passengers' bags and briefcases. Does the VRE plan on doing this as well?

### **VRE Management:**

VRE already has VIPR (Visible Intermodal Prevention and Response) teams that randomly board our trains to ensure safety and security of our passengers. These teams are comprised of local police districts as well as federal agencies like the Federal Air Marshals and Homeland Security. They are trained to spot suspicious behavior and have the authority to arrest any suspects.

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### **Gary from Woodbridge, VA asks:**

What is the largest consist that can currently be supported? Will that change with the new engines?

### **VRE Management:**

The engines in our current fleet can pull eight cars by itself. The new locomotives will be able to pull ten car trains.

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### **Jeff from Rippon asks:**

How does VRE compute their "Current Midweek Ridership" numbers? 300 shows 941 out of 1110 available and 305 shows 741 out of 786 available...but when I ride 300 & 305 there doesn't seem to be any empty seats.

**VRE Management:**

The midweek rider numbers are averaged from the conductor's counts from Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays of every month. The current numbers are from September. I have noticed October's ridership has increased and once we have official numbers, the consist page should reflect that.

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**Frank from Fredericksburg, VA asks:**

A marked pedestrian crosswalk is needed to aid train riders in safely crossing to and from the FRED Bus Stop on Caroline Street at the train station. Currently, riders are actually forced to "jay walk" to make the crossing. There have been several near miss accidents involving unsuspecting motorists and passengers moving between the FRED Bus Stop and the train station. A marked cross walk would alert motorists and require riders to cross in the designated location. Additionally, brighter street lighting at the crossing would also lend to a safer crossing.

**VRE Management:**

The better answer is to change the stair configuration so that people can go directly from street to the parking lot. We have designed stairs and waiting for the permits from the City of Fredericksburg. Once we have the permits, the stairs will be installed.

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**Alan from Fredricksburg asks:**

Is there any chance that the new operation contractor is associated in any way with the operator of the LAX commuter operation?

**VRE Management:**

The Operations Board recommended an award to Keolis Rail Services America. This company is in no way associated with the company that is currently operating the Metrolink service in California.

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**Davin from Woodbridge, VA asks:**

I read on a message board that someone spotted a VRE locomotive in Maine. What is it doing there? Is it the one you sold to RailWorld?

**VRE Management:**

We sold an F-40 locomotive to RailWorld and that could have been the locomotive. The livery was not changed.

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**Idalia from Burke, VA asks:**

The Burke Centre Station needs a trashcan at the second level garage entrance so people can put

their trash as they exit the train. There are two trashcans at the lower level next to the benches. why can't you move one of them up?

**VRE Management:**

I will work with Fairfax County to have trashcans put in that area.

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**David from Gainesville VA asks:**

On a per diem basis, monthly tickets are way cheaper than 10, 5 and 1 trip tickets. Given that fact, how does one determine which to use if you are not going to take the train every day. Is there a break even point (say, 15 days)? Is there an online calculator?

**VRE Management:**

If it helps, we no longer issue refunds for monthly tickets after the 13th service day. We consider that to be the break even point for monthly tickets.

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**Jon from Rippon asks:**

Any chance that benches can be installed at Rippon or that the overhang(rain protection) can be extended at Rippon?

**VRE Management:**

We have gotten a few requests to improve the Rippon station and we are currently looking at providing some of those improvements.

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**Tom from FB asks:**

Just curious...who recorded the automated announcements on the trains that announce station stops? Is there a picture of her anywhere? I like putting faces with voices.

**VRE Management:**

I do not know who recorded those announcements but I am glad 1) that you hear them and 2) you enjoy her voice.

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**John from Manassas asks:**

Received the "Safety for VRE Commuters will be left at the station" leaflet from "Virginians for Safe Commuter Rail" in my seat this morning. Was the leaflet a VRE sanctioned distribution? What is your response to the concerns raised in the leaflet?

**VRE Management:**

The flyer left on some seats this morning was in no way sanctioned by VRE. We are still

investigating who placed the flyers on the trains and will respond accordingly. We will also address the issues related to the recommendation of Keolis as a new provider of VRE service after the Commission meetings this Thursday.

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**Maria from Haymarket** asks:

What is the current status of the Gainesville-Haymarket extension now that the primary impact study is done? Its been a decade in the making, and understand it could easily be another decade, but very much looking forward to it.

**VRE Management:**

We have issued an RFP for environmental analysis and preliminary engineering. Once we work through that process, we will have a better idea when the service may begin.

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**mark from the burg** asks:

when the two supervisors are reelected and vre is started in Spotsylvania when is the earliest we will see a train in that area as well as the express train?

**VRE Management:**

Providing Spotsylvania does not change its mind about joining VRE, service will start from there once a station is built and that will take a few years. In the meanwhile, I budgeted for express service from Fredericksburg, Brooke, and Leeland to the inner city stations to start in July 2011. Once the Board and commissions approve the budget, we will let the riders know officially.

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**Vee from Woodbridge, VA** asks:

I have no complaints about VRE. I love VRE and would not travel to work in D.C. without it. My complaint is with some of the advertisements at the stations that are not in English. I was pretty distraught the first time I saw one. I believe (as do many people) that if you're going to advertise, do it in English. Everyone that I've spoken with that has seen these signs believes that they should be taken down. There's one on the Rippon bridge and one at L'Enfant. I can't speak for the other stations because I don't use them.

**VRE Management:**

We contract that space out to an advertising firm. There is a specific set of guidelines that they must follow but providing the advertisements in English is not one of those requirements.

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**Betty from Burke, VA** asks:

What is your policy about offering the Metro option when trains are late? Last week when train #328 was almost an hour late because of leaf oil, the Metro option was NOT available. When it

was clear that the trains were delayed more than 40 minutes, why was this not instituted? I had to pay for parking AND Metro fare at Franconia. That really was adding insult to injury!

**VRE Management:**

I apologize for this and will look into why it was not implemented.

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**Kevin from Manassas, VA asks:**

While I certainly understand the need to crack down on those who try to board VRE trains without a valid ticket, the current system is harsh to those who just make honest mistakes. Why couldn't the law be revised so that VRE would issue a written warning to first-time violators, with the violators name being recorded in a database. On the second violations within a given period, an immediate summons could be issued. Repeat violators could be banned from the train. There are many who don't try to cheat the system but are punished for human mistakes.

**VRE Management:**

When we went to the General Assembly to get a harsher penalty for repeat offenders, the law was changed so the same punishment applied to anyone without a valid ticket. I am working with the General Assembly to have this law changed next year. Unfortunately, we cannot change it in the meanwhile.

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**Mark from Lorton, VA asks:**

Have you instructed conductors to stop giving a summons to any rider who carries a legitimate ticket but forgets to validate it for a particular ride? Such a summons, which will in all likelihood be thrown out of court as not willful, is nevertheless a huge expense and inconvenience for all involved.

**VRE Management:**

With that said, I still am requiring our crews to issue summons. It is important to continue to protect our fare revenue.

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**RickG from Manassas, VA asks:**

With the Seasonal and the H1N1 flu circulating what procedures does the VRE have in place (and their frequency) to sanitize the passenger car surfaces such as hand rails and seats and air circulation/filtering to minimize patrons from contracting the flu?

**VRE Management:**

"All touch points," i.e. hand rails, hand holds, bathroom door handles, are sanitized every night. Air filters are changed on a regular basis.

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**Jason from Manassas, VA** asks:

What are issues keeping VRE/PRTC from joining Google Transit. The LIRR in NYC is on Google Transit.

**VRE Management:**

There are some legal as well as some technical issues. Hopefully we can work through those issues and be part of Google Transit.

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

What is going to be done about the parking situation at Manassas Park. Yesterday was the first time I have seen it full on a Monday.

**VRE Management:**

Manassas Park is one of our busiest stations; unfortunately there are no plans at this time to expand parking at Manassas Park due to the unavailability of land in the immediate area. The only recourse I can suggest is to park at Manassas, where there is plenty of surface parking or Burke Centre where there are 1,000 spaces in the garage.

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**John from Bristow, VA** asks:

Why does Piper Ln. not have a left turn lane onto Route 28 at Broad Run?

**VRE Management:**

We have approached VDOT about this issue and we are told there is no money to add an additional lane. While they know about the amount of VRE riders turning left there, they do not want tweak the timing anymore than they have because of the backup it causes on Route 28.

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**Jeanette from Woodbridge, VA** asks:

What can you tell passengers about Keolis, especially in light of the flyer I saw this morning?

**VRE Management:**

We are in still a confidential procurement process. Once the Commissions make a decision Thursday night, we will be in a better position to share more information with you. Look for a Train Talk Friday morning should the Commissions approve the contract.

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**Gene from Bristow, VA** asks:

Are there plans to build a parking deck at the Broad Run VRE station?

**VRE Management:**

Prince William County will provide us funding for the environmental and preliminary design for a parking structure at Broad Run. We still would have to find money for construction.

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**Lauren from Burke, VA** asks:

What's up with the Manassas line 326? It's been consistently late for the past couple of weeks. Is this a Norfolk Southern problem? Hope we can get back up to speed soon!

**VRE Management:**

Train 326 had a few delays in the recent weeks due to a variety of events. One of them was a railroad issue due to signals, the rest were due to following other trains after Alexandria. I will continue to keep an eye on this train and see what we can do to make it better.

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**Paul from Burke, VA** asks:

How is the new Amtrak service doing?

**VRE Management:**

I am assuming you are talking about the Lynchburg Train. I have not seen official numbers yet but will let you know once I do.

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**Abraham from Bristow VA** asks:

This isn't a question. It is more of an observation: The yellow line on the platform is sometimes used by passengers as a walkway at the ends of the platform to get around the crowd that is cuing, presumably to get ahead of them into the train. When the train is approaching, this is kind of dangerous and is scary to watch.

**VRE Management:**

I agree. We would prefer all of our riders to stay well behind the yellow tactile edge and will continue to remind our riders that this is not a good place to walk.

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**john from manassas** asks:

Why don't you prohibit smoking at VRE stations like Metro does?

**VRE Management:**

We cannot ban smoking at outdoor facilities in Virginia. We do have designated smoking areas and encourage our smokers to limit their smoking activities to those locations. By comparison, Metro has underground station and can make a more uniform policy as a result.

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**Jim from Rippon** asks:

I have so many questions about the award of the operating contract to Keolis - I know the PRTC still have to agree to it. I shall though stick to one as some of my questions can only be addressed by Keolis themselves. What does a company that has never operated a railway in North America offer you that Amtrak does not (apart from the fact they are cheaper)? Having seen how these things work in the UK, I really am hoping VRE make a better job of it than their UK counterparts.

**VRE Management:**

A complete procurement for a provider of VRE was initiated on May 8, 2009. At the October 16, 2009 Operations Board meeting the Board recommended the selection of Keolis. That recommendation must be approved by both Commissions at their meetings on Thursday night before an award can be made. If approved on Thursday we will answer the questions and concerns raised by the selection. Until that time, I cannot comment on the specifics of the selection.

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**Donna from Fredericksburg** asks:

Is there any way to increase the number of handicapped spaces available at Fredericksburg. By the time I arrive for the 302, no spaces are available. The farthest lot (1/2 mile walk) is full for the 304. Due to this, some of us are not able to make the walk to the train and drive instead. Are we allowed to park in the City lots with a valid placard?

**VRE Management:**

I know we have the required number of spaces required by law in Fredericksburg. We don't have any plans at this time to provide anymore. Again, this is an area that would benefit from having a station built in Spotsylvania.

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**Monty from Fairfax, VA** asks:

Apparently there is an issue coming up on whether or not to get rid of the reduced fare for certain age groups. In the information it said that people 21 and under (students?) could pay 50% off. Where was this button when I was buying my tickets over the summer?

**VRE Management:**

I am sorry that you were not aware of this program. Youth fares like all of our other discount tickets can only be purchased at select area vendors, not at the TVMs.

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**Mike from Freddy** asks:

Why did VRE choose to punish disabled riders by forcing us to go the Commuter Direct stores to

buy fare cards instead of from 7-11 like every other customer? Why are you requiring disabled passengers to carry another card. If you are disabled in Washington, DC or Maryland you're going to be disabled in Virginia as well?

**VRE Management:**

We did not intend to punish disabled riders with the changes in our discount policy. Our aim is to reduce fraud and increase revenue by limiting sales to the vendors near our destination stations. The other alternatives were to raise fares, very unpopular since we have had 3 in the last 18 months, or reduce service.

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**Steve from Burke asks:**

What's the delivery schedule for passenger cars on the Manassas Line? I was subjected to one of the dilapidated train sets last week as I took a different train. It was not an enjoyable way to end my day. I'm sure we are all eager to see those cars leave the rails as those cars are old and tired ... and smell.

**VRE Management:**

We should see the new passenger cars in operation by spring of next year. You may occasionally see older cars as one older set of cars will stay in operation but will be rotated through different trains and different lines. We will also use the older cars as backup when the newer cars are undergoing scheduled maintenance.

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**Bill from Burke asks:**

Can you update us on the status of the platform extension at Burke? It looks like construction has come to a halt. I was wondering about the timetable.

**VRE Management:**

Still on schedule for a December completion. You should see the roof of the canopy go up next week and continue to see other progress as well.

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**Judy from Clifton asks:**

I struggle to understand why the platform monitors can't provide more detailed information about train status. During the long "leaf oil" delay last week, the monitors at Burke were either black/inoperable or had no information regarding the delay. We were also amused that the recording called it a "weather delay" even though the sun was shining. But during this time of instant information and high-speed connectivity, I think your information system needs an upgrade.

**VRE Management:**

We apologize for the delayed communication that morning. Our GPS unit on train 328 was out

that morning and delay information from our contacts was slow as well. We do not have a “leaf oil” delay as one of the pre-programmed delay reasons and weather is the closest description. (The autumn weather caused the leaves to fall.) If the pre-programmed reason is not specific enough, we type a more detailed reason to go along with it, which was the case that morning.

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**Tammy from Springfield** asks:

Yesterday, train 327 slid nearly past the stop at Rolling Road, leaving only the last two cars on the platform. Leaf oil???

**VRE Management:**

Yes, it was wheel slippage due to leaf oil. While falling leaves is beautiful for most people, it is an ugly site for those of us that operate trains.

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**John from Manassas** asks:

Are the leaf problems over?

**VRE Management:**

Until all the leaves have fallen off the trees for this season, we may still see wheel slippage due to leaf oil. Then we will see the problem again next year.

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**Bob from Alexandria, VA** asks:

Do you think it's fair for VRE to fine people who don't have tickets when almost all your machines are broken?? It's not our responsibility to alert you to the broken machines. It's VRE's issue and you need to have YOUR staff travel to each location to research the issues. Please heed the advice, otherwise all of us have a legitimate reason not to have a ticket.

**VRE Management:**

You are not required to tell us there is a broken machine, you are only required to tell the conductor PRIOR to boarding the train you have a ticket issue.

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**Don from Manassas, VA** asks:

Your consist page shows train 329 having 786 seats for 907 passengers. Have you considered adding a car so that it's not SRO from Alexandria to Rolling Road? (331 has many more seats than passengers.)

**VRE Management:**

I have been watching the ridership on the Manassas Line grow over the last several months and Train 329 is no exception. When looking at trains 329 and 331, their ridership is very similar.

Swapping the equipment from 329 to 331 will only create similiar condidtions for 331. Due to storage and other issues, I cannot add any cars to 331 but will continue to monitor and make adjustments as soon as we are able.

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**Joe from Fburg** asks:

When I validate my 10 trip the machine frequently overprints or prints the next validation low on the card. Making it hard to tell if its validated or not. Are these issue monitored and machines adjusted?

**VRE Management:**

Yes. Our staff and technicians monitor the issues that are brought to our attention and perform routine maintenance on the equipment.

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**Wes from Woodbridge** asks:

Do you see an expansion of the Rippon station as being feasible/necessary in the near future? I was thinking along the lines of the new platform that the Woodbridge station is getting.

**VRE Management:**

Yes, we have plans on having second platforms at Lorton and Rippon. When those are in place, our trains can “platform” on either track from Alexandria to Quantico. This will improve the overall performance of the railroad and give us more options during irregular operations.

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**Mac from Fredericksburg** asks:

No complaints. On 26 Oct 303 was held up at Woodbridge because passenger assistance was needed. When we pulled in to Fred the PA system was still announcing that 303 was 10 minutes late. The following day, the daily download didn't mention it. Just curious. Your folks are doing just fine.

**VRE Management:**

While 303 incurred a delay at Woodbridge, there is slack built into the schedules that allow trains to make up time. It was officially 5 minutes late into Fredericksburg, and anything 5 minutes and under into the last station is considered on-time.

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**Amused from Bristow** asks:

The queuing in the aisles in just comical. On train 331 folks (2 older ladies and 2 gentlemen)in the last car get up and wait in the aisle at Manassas Park WAY before the train departs the station so they can be first in line at Manassas. Is it that critical to get in line that early?!

Really!?!? Other trains are worse...forget about Broad Runners at the Manassas station. Calling you folks out.

**VRE Management:**

Queuing has been a continuing battle over the years. We often put out various communications telling people to slow down for the courtesy and safety of others. We also have a “Standing Means Detraining” policy that conductors should enforce.

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**Mona from Fairfax, VA** asks:

When will customers be able to directly purchase VRE tickets using Smartrip (at VRE stations/platforms rather than via commuterdirect.com)?

**VRE Management:**

I understand the convenience this has for our customers. During our upcoming procurement of new fare collection equipment, we hope to have this compatibility with SmarTrip cards. Unfortunately, we have to wait for Metro to upgrade their equipment first and give us the specs. It will be at least a couple of years.

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**VRE Management:**

I do want to take a moment and remind all of you Fredericksburg Line riders of our planned service disruption on Monday, November 16th. We will operate trains 300, 304, and 310 in the morning and 303, 307, and 313 in the evening. Delays could start north of Rippon going northbound and last up to an hour. I am working on providing a bus bridge for the mid-day train. I am also working with WMATA on how they can help us. FRCs will not be issued to Fredericksburg Line trains that day. We do not anticipate any problems with the Manassas Line.

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**VRE Management:**

There were a number of questions regarding the selection of Keolis. As I said earlier, I am not able to answer most of them at this time due to we are still in the procurement process. After the Commission meetings on Thursday, we will be issuing a press release and Train Talk providing more detailed information on the procurement process and Keolis' background. I will also be happy to answer any more question in the December On-Line Forum, which will be Wednesday, December 2nd.

-Dale

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