

Let's Talk!

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



There are currently 114 questions waiting to be answered.

VRE Management:

Happy March! Hopefully spring is on its way. We had 94% on-time performance for February on both lines, something that hasn't occurred since September 2009. I am working to keep that trend going. Here with me today is Chipp Boone, Fredericksburg Line Transportation Manager. And with that, let's get started.

Greg from Woodbridge asks:

Can you ask the Conductors to try harder to get those standing to move to other cars where there are seats? When trains arrive on a short track and passengers can only get into 1 or 2 cars...they just stay in that car.

VRE Management:

I will continue to work with the crews on the queuing issue.

Kevin from Stafford, VA asks:

Dale, Thanks for the email updates via train-talk, they are helpful. Two questions for you. 1) Am I correct to assume that the trains will see wifi over the next two months (as you said in previous "Let's Talk!" sessions)? 2) Also, you always seem to use phrases like "cobble the money together" when discussing future improvements, while at the same time boasting of increased "record-breaking" ridership. Do you see how this can be frustrating to a loyal rider? Thanks for your response, Kevin

VRE Management:

Your welcome, Kevin. I have gotten a lot of positive feedback from my monthly messages. As for the WiFi, it will take longer than I anticipated due to the increased costs. And for your second question, the budget is always tricky. On the one hand, jurisdictions are looking to reduce their funding to VRE while ridership is at an all time high. Fares cover about 50% of our operating expenses, which leaves me looking for funding for the other 50%.

Dave from Fairfax, VA asks:

A "Yield to Pedestrians" sign used to be in front of L'Enfant Station, but was plowed over last year and never returned. On a daily basis, I see people almost run over by cars not slowing down for train passengers crossing the road. Can someone look into restoring the sign?

VRE Management:

I will ask our Facilities Superintendent contact DCDOT.

Dan from Manassas asks:

Dale, I am very excited about the reduction in the \$10 Step-Up. Thanks for your persistence on this issue. The reduction will be a blessing to many VRE riders and to Amtrak.

VRE Management:

Thank, Dan but it is not a done deal yet. I will be discussing with the Operations Board this month.

Yvonne from Arlington asks:

Any closer to providing trains (modified schedule) for riders who do not have federal holidays off? thank you.

VRE Management:

Yes, April has been bugging me about this every week and I am looking into it because of the increased ridership.

Jodie from Woodbridge, VA asks:

Hi, and thanks for the comfortable and reliable service VRE provides. Are plans still in the works to install wi-fi on the trains? This would be a tremendous benefit and I really hope to see it soon.

VRE Management:

I discussed WiFi on the trains with the board in February. After we had looked at the possible ways of doing it, I advised the Board that if we are going to install WiFi on the trains, that we do it in a way that provides the best connectivity to all riders on the train no matter what car they are in and design the system in a way such that the connectivity is continuous for the entire VRE ride. To accomplish that, we are going to have to change our approach and procure the system with an outside vendor. This approach will take longer and cost substantially more. I told the Board that I would return in the summer with a funding plan and an approach to accomplish that. That said, I do not see WiFi until late this year or early next year. I know that it will be a

disappointment to some of you, but I don't want to install WiFi unless it will meet all your expectations.

Steve from Stafford, VA asks:

As a relatively new rider, I've discovered many people gaggle up at the train exits when the next station is coming up. I don't have an issue with this as it obviously speeds up the process. The problem comes from all the groups gathering up for stops later in the route. I've missed my stop once and nearly missed getting off one other time. Can something be done to request riders to stay seated (assuming they have a seat) until their stop is next on the route? This will allow the rest of us to get off at the proper stop without crowding or aggression. Thank you very much!

VRE Management:

Welcome to VRE, Steve! We refer to this as queuing and has been a growing problem as our trains see more and more riders. There is a right and wrong way to queue: you can stand as long as the next station is yours and the train has departed the previous station but we ask riders to sit if the next station is not theirs. People queuing the wrong way has led to problems like you mention and I will continue to work with conductors to enforce proper queuing.

RichG from Manassas, VA asks:

Step Boxes at Alexandria: Why won't the conductors put out the step boxes as per your announcements and policy? Getting on or off at Alexandria is extremely hard given the low platform.

VRE Management:

Please email gotrains@vre.org and let us know which train you are experiencing on. Stepboxes are usually only put out at the conductor locations and the trains I have been on, they have been doing this.

Phil S. of RollingRoad from Burke, VA. asks:

Has VRE's annual emergency simulation exercises in recent years resulted in local, state, and/or federal emergency response, HAZMAT, or other crisis-related partners' participation?

VRE Management:

VRE conducts annual emergency drills. They are usually attended by many local, state, and federal agencies. To answer your other questions, we do have an after action report on ways to improve response to emergencies, but they are not graded by any agencies.

M from Burke asks:

Will we ever be able to buy VRE tickets using SmarTrip cards from the ticket machines on the platforms? Thanks.

VRE Management:

No not currently, but hopefully you will be able to in the design of the new fare collection system in two to three years.

David from Richmond VA asks:

Since the step-up tickets are good for one year, could we get them added to the purchasable items from Commuter Direct?

VRE Management:

No. Although you can purchase them from other VRE vendors or at the station. The reason that CommuterDirect doesn't sell Step-Ups is because of the commission they charge us. I will see if I can renegotiate this with them.

Rachael from Falmouth, VA asks:

I would like to know why nothing seems to be done about the lateness of Fred-line #305? It is ALWAYS late getting into the Brooke station in the evening. There doesn't seem to be a care at all by the conductors, maybe it's because they also don't check tickets in the south side cars until AFTER Quantico? C'mon can I gain 10 minutes in the evening? Not a big deal to you I guess but it is to me...

VRE Management:

I am not aware of #305 being late. I show that train was 100% on-time for the month of February. A quick glance at this week only shows that it is getting to Brooke on time if not early.

Mike from Broad Run asks:

Why does the 8 car train 328/331 from Broad Run still not have a new locomotive pulling it. Since it is the 8 car train you said it would get one of the first new locomotives

VRE Management:

You will eventually see a new locomotive on that trainset. The priority is to put the three new locomotives on the turn trips on the Manassas side. They operate the most mileage on a daily basis.

Michele from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

With regard to parking at Leeland Rd., I made a request for VDOT to fill the potholes and ruts in

the overflow parking lot, to which they said No because they don't maintain that part of the lot. Last year they did honor my request and put some gravel in the holes, etc. So the question is, with the steady deterioration of the dirt lot, can the expansion of the parking lot at Leeland be accelerated please?

VRE Management:

We lease the gravel lot from a developer and I will ask our Facilities Superintendent look into it.

Broad Run from Broad Run asks:

One night on the train a man in front of me asked the conductor a question about the 5 day pass. Since it was a Thursday, the conductor told him that she recommends waiting to buy the 5 day pass until Monday that way the weekend days would not be lost. She had no idea that 5 day passes don't count the weekend as part of the 5 days. How can this happen? How can conductors not know that 5 day passes are 5 business days?

VRE Management:

Please send us the train number that you heard this conversation to gotrains@vre.org on so we can work on clarifying the 5 Day ticket with this individual.

Gary from Quantico VA asks:

Why are conductors allowed to put their junk on passenger seats? One conductor in particular takes up TWO seats with his junk & places a "reserved" sign on the seats. Aren't seats for paying passengers? And then the conductors have the audacity to say please take your junk off the seats! You expect us to show courtesy but don't expect your conductors to show the same courtesy. Shouldn't ALL seats always be reserved for PAYING customers?

VRE Management:

Conductors are not to be taking up seats with their belongings. Again please gotrains@vre.org with the train number, we will correct this.

Gary from Culpeper, VA asks:

Can you give an estimate as to when passenger capacity may be increased? More cars? More trains?

VRE Management:

By 1 July, you may see some additional cars on the train and/or a reduction in the Amtrak Step-Up. This should help things some.

Owens from Fredericksburg, Va asks:

Not a Complaint - Just an Observation and Request Train 300 * 311- Conductors or automatic systems rarely announce the upcoming stations. IT is dark outside and very difficult to tell what station is next or current. I have missed my stop because of it. Thanks M.

VRE Management:

Improvements in the station announcements are something I have been focusing on lately. I will talk with Keolis to make sure the automated announcements are working and if not, live announcements are made.

Deb from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

What's with all the railroad ties piled up alongside of the Fredericksburg line tracks?

VRE Management:

CSX will begin a tie replacement program next week. As a result, the Fredericksburg Line might have some minor temporary slow orders.

Ravi from Bristow, VA asks:

When we can expect parking garage at Broad Run station? Its getting worse again even after getting 180 new parking spaces. Thanks

VRE Management:

I noticed the other day that cars are now parking on the access road again. I can't believe we filled up the 200 spaces already. However, I do not expect a garage to be built for at least another two to three years.

Jim from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

Hi, Can we have faster trains? Thank you.

VRE Management:

Just like on the highways, our trains have specific speeds that they cannot operate over. I assure you the engineers would like to go faster, too.

Marvin from Fredericksburg, Va asks:

Franconia/Springfield Bridge. The steps on the far side of Metro at the station are really in bad shape. Any plans to repair them?

VRE Management:

We have the money to fix them and the bid should go out soon.

MJBucci from **Leeland** asks:

Glad to see the "zero" tolerance with respect to boarding a train with an unvalidated ticket... this view of enforcement was long overdue.

VRE Management:

Chipp says thank you for noticing. He will pass along the positive feedback to the conductors on the Fredericksburg and Manassas Lines.

Ish from **Manassas, VA** asks:

As we approach the "rainy" season, is VRE putting any effort in clearing trees and branches along side the tracks? Because there have been multiple occasions when trees have fallen on the tracks causing incredible delays?

VRE Management:

We were just talking the other day about how there could be trees still left after the amount that have fallen over the years the host railroads are responsible for the trees alongside the tracks and normally cut down the ones closest. Unfortunately, along the Manassas side, there is only so much we can do.

Cathi from **Manassas** asks:

Dale, thanks so much for delivering the promised improvements to service on the Manassas line. I can't recall any significant delays since the first of January. It really makes the commute so much better. Kudos to Keolis and everyone at VRE!

VRE Management:

Thank you for the compliment. Everyone at Keolis and VRE are working very very hard to make the system more reliable and increase the on-time performance.

Sabrina from **Manassas, VA** asks:

How much effort has VRE put toward increasing the realibility of the system?

VRE Management:

I guess even with a stellar month like February, there is always room for improvement.

Rose from Stafford, VA asks:

Train 300 has reached its capacity and then some. There are very few seats once it reaches Brooke and absolutely no seats for Woodbridge riders unless earlier riders stand up. Are there any plans to add cars to this early train? With gas prices continuing to rise, this is going to be an ongoing issue with the express and most of the rest of the trains.

VRE Management:

I am aware of the crowding on 300. When I add additional cars, 300 will get an additional car.

Edward from Manassas asks:

I thought the plan was to move the old gallery cars among all the train sets so that no one was stuck riding in another decade. MAN324 has had the older cars for several months now. What happened to the original plan?

VRE Management:

The legacy cars will stay on that train for awhile. If things go as planned and I can add some cars to some trains, we will look again at where the legacy Gallery cars will go.

Carrie from Manassas asks:

In Manassas station there is a homeless man that sleeps inside the station. Is he allowed to be there?

VRE Management:

I will contact the Manassas Visitor's Center and see what they can do to help the situation.

Walter from Bristow, VA asks:

In order to reduce rider and conductor frustration, court costs and everyone's valuable time just because someone forgot to validate a ticket, why can't the VRE do like the MARC does and allow the rider to pay a one-way fare (plus a \$5 convenient fee) while on the train? The conductors on the MARC even carry portable credit card machines (the old slide ones) for convenience in case the rider doesn't have cash. If they have neither cash or credit card, THEN hit them with a summons. Seems like such a simple fix.

VRE Management:

Seems simple but that would require funding. In addition, trains only have two crew members who could not process many tickets and still do their other duties.

Jan from Fredericksburg asks:

No question...just a compliment to you, Dale, for your dedication and commitment to provide VRE riders with great and consistent service as gas prices and our ridership continue to increase. I personally want you to know that the Keolis employees are doing an excellent job in support of their contract to meet VRE contractual service levels while maintaining the safety of the ridership.

VRE Management:

Thanks, Jan, Chipp says he loves you.

K from Dumfries VA asks:

Hi Dale and Chipp, This is not really a question... I just wanted to send out a huge thank you to you folks for the excellent service you provide. I started riding (Rippon to Union Station) in September and love love love it. I was driving before and that was horrible. Also the Conductors on the Fred line are pretty great :) Tim, Dave, George, Marisol, Aaron, Gerald, I'm pretty sure I don't know everyone's name as I don't ride all the different trains. But you have an excellent staff.

VRE Management:

Thanks, I agree, Keolis has hired a quality group of people. They continue to impress me.

Reza from Manassas, VA asks:

Hello, I am concerned about the way FRC's are being checked on the train. Some conductors tear half the FRC and give you half to keep. Some conductors let you keep the whole FRC. Some conductors take the whole FRC. Since the conductors are checking tickets multiple times on the train, what's to stop them from issuing a summons for not having a valid ticket even though FRC users did have one earlier on the train ride but the conductor took it from you and later you don't have anything to show when the conductors check again?

VRE Management:

I will look into this and see if we can make this process consistent.

Jack from Rolling Road asks:

Passengers continue to ask, but it seems like the answer is always evaded. How do the automated announcements work: GPS, distance traveled, entered by conductor? However they work, they must be very complicated. Keolis will be here almost a year soon, and still can't seem to operate them consistently. And yes, Amtrak once in awhile had trouble with them, but not every train, every day.

VRE Management:

The automated announcements gauge where the train is by how much the wheels have rotated. Sometimes it miscalculates and we are already working with the crews to make sure they know how to reset it. Please let us know via gotrains@vre.org which trains you ride and notice the problem.

Angie W. from Manassas, VA asks:

The display monitors at the Manassas station have not worked consistently since early December. I have sent in requests to have them checked through gotrains@vre.org and each time get a reply that they will be checked. The reply one month ago said the manager of the IT dept was checking them that week. I would like to know what the status of these monitors is? Why have them if they are dark everyday for 3 months?

VRE Management:

Sorry for any inconvenience. The IT manager tells me he has to replace the video card and is waiting for the part to come in. It will be fixed ASAP. He states the PA system is still functional.

Shelly B from Burke asks:

I would like to express my thanks and Gratitude to the ladies on Train 322 Tieara and Alanna they are so nice and polite I'm new to the VRE and I had a problem with the ticket machine Tieara Took the time out to explain it all to me Thank you again ladies and It's great Seeing Women Conductors In Charge

VRE Management:

Wow, we are getting a lot of compliments today. I am sure Chipp will pass this along to Scott, the manager for the Manassas Line crews, and now all we need is a woman engineer.

Stacy from Burke Centre asks:

It concerns me that VRE is even considering extending service farther out. That just increases the chances of signal issues, breakdowns, etc. For an outfit that can't seem to provide consistent on time service, why would you increase the odds of delays. It's like signing up for a high school honors class when you can't pass the basic class.

VRE Management:

We only had 14 trains late out of 266 in the month of February, 94.7% on-time and are working to continue this trend. Before service is added or lines expanded, the host railroads require certain improvements to the track before implementing.

Andrew from fredericksburg asks:

Last month you said that you would look into the pot holes in the Fredericksburg overflow lot. This is a really big problem I have hit those pot holes that are almost a foot deep and cause big problems when its raining b/c other just fly thur the lots and splash the water on the people who are walking. Please have them fixed I know that you have a lot more important stuff on your plate right now but this would help you customers a lot. thank you.

VRE Management:

I will continue to press the issue.

Steve from Woodbridge asks:

While you are adjusting fares, how about nixing senior fares? Seniors are going to work just like I am, so why should they pay less? If VRE is required to offer senior discounts because they are public transit, then offer senior fares only for use on one train in/out, or only on single trip tickets, and only for tourists, not full-time commuters like me.

VRE Management:

Thanks for the suggestion, Steve, but we are required to provide Senior fares by the Federal Transit Administration.

Rick from Stafford, VA asks:

Just a simple request... would it please be possible for conductors to make sure that they've got a ready supply of FRCs. I noticed a few that never bother distributing them despite their trains being at least a 1/2 hour late. That means the onus is on we riders to go through all the hassle of requesting one. Thanks!

VRE Management:

The crews are required to have enough FRCs for two trainloads of people but the real answer is to keep the trains on-time so that FRCs do not have be handed out.

Carla from Fredericksburg asks:

If there is a gov't shutdown, what is VRE's plan; normal schedule, "S" schedule or no schedule run? Not all of us work for the feds.

VRE Management:

We will continue to run full service as long as we can, however; we cannot sustain a reduced ridership for an extended period of time.

Andy from Broad Run asks:

Dale, Last month, when someone wrote in to ask if you would "consider suspending the Quiet Car Designation when trains are over capacity," you responded that you would look into it. I hope you were kidding. The only requirement for anyone to ride the quiet car -- whether the train is crowded or not -- is to be quiet. That doesn't seem like a lot to ask of those "special" people who have five or seven others cars in which to yak it up on their cell phones.

VRE Management:

Riders either love or loathe the Quiet Car and regularly get comments about getting rid of it or expanding it beyond one car. As for your specific question, it is hard to enforce quiet when a car is "packed to the gills."

Big D from WB, VA asks:

When will it be decided if the step up tickets will be reduced to \$5? How long would it take before it would become effective if approved?

VRE Management:

I need to get Board approval first, that could occur in March. We will work on an implementation plan after that.

Steve from Burke, VA asks:

Dale, I've really enjoy riding the train and the on time performance has really improved...possibly because of some of the new locomotives in use now. When do you see the next increase in tickets coming? Also, it seems as if your conductors (at least on my trains) are not regularly checking all riders for tickets (#322 & 329/331). I know most of us are honest, but unless VRE generates revenue you can't address the overcrowding issues. Thank you!

VRE Management:

Thanks for noticing. I will do everything I can to not increase fares and I will look into the ticket checking on the trains you mention.

Debbie Hamilton from Woodbridge, VA asks:

Often, we are told to go to a particular car to de-board and are given a car number, but there is no car number posted in the car; so other than follow others, and hope you are going in the right direction, how do you know you're headed to the right car?

VRE Management:

There are car numbers on the train, usually on or above the door to the next car. With that said, I will ask the conductors to be more specific with their instructions.

Joseph from Manassas Park, VA asks:

Has VRE thought of creating an iPhone app that has schedule information, real time (rail time) maps, etc... Maybe even push notifications for delays, notifications, etc... Would be a great resource to have! Service has been excellent over the past few weeks so keep it up! :-D

VRE Management:

We have been looking into this. I have a lot of iPhone staff people who are asking for one as well.

Sarah from Haymarket, VA asks:

At the Manassas station, parking is filling up before the last train in the morning. Is it possible to re-designate the spots on Prince William Street in front of the garage by the museum as commuter spots? When that fix was in place, it seemed to help dramatically.

VRE Management:

Let me see what I can do. I will talk to the City and see if they have any other options for us.

Robert from Fredericksburg VA asks:

While there is an effort to renovate the Fredericksburg Station, traffic to the platform where VRE picks up passengers is restricted by temporary construction fences. These fences are currently routing traffic off the train, down the stairs, and around the back of the German restaurant. Problem is that the path around the back of the restaurant has a clogged drain in the sidewalk which on heavy rain days creates a puddle the entire width of the sidewalk that is 2-3 inches deep. As a proactive measure while construction is ongoing, can this drain be cleared so that passengers can get through?

VRE Management:

I'll look into it.

Chuck from Fredericksburg asks:

Why do you insist on and appear to take great pride in the fact that you are overstuffing passenger cars? Your statistical rant on breaking passenger count numbers is in-appropriate. You would not overload a ship with sailors and marines, why do you think it is OK to overload rail cars? God forbid a derailment occurs with a standard compliment of riders in assigned seats. But an overweight car with riders standing in the upper gallery aisles the lavatory, main floor aisle and vestibules is un-safe. We are not cattle for profit.

VRE Management:

As a former Navy officer, I would only overload the trains with Marines because they could handle it. But seriously, at this point of overcrowding is telling people they cannot board the train, which is something I do not want to entertain.

Steve from Broad Run asks:

Dale: Hope is a lousy plan or policy. I see a lot of hoping going on here. A retired Navy Captain wouldn't put up with a Chief that uses the word hope so much. klp

VRE Management:

You are right, but hope is all we have.

Tami from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

There sure does seem to be a lot of complaining on this forum lately! I for one, am very happy there is an alternative to driving from my home to DC every day! Try driving your car to DC in an hour and half! Not bloody likely people. Let's give thanks to the crew and mananagement for their dedication to providing us a clean, comfortable and on-time mode of transportaion. THANK YOU!

VRE Management:

Thank you for the kind comments. I'll pass it on.

M from Manassas asks:

Man I need to take the Fred. Line sounds like they have a better ride the the Manassas Line. Alot of our Conductors are rude, most the time we are standing, and trains are late.

VRE Management:

Chipp says thanks, and I'll see you Monday on the train.

Charlie Sheen from Winning-ness asks:

I'm special! Can I get a rocket ship to the moon for me and my goddesses? That's how I roll.

VRE Management:

Charlie I know you have been all over the media, but all of our riders are special!

VRE Management:

On that note, I think I'll end it here. I know that we are doing pretty good when most of your

questions are about WiFi, parking and potholes, which are certainly topics we definitely need to address. I look forward to chatting with you again next month on April 6th which will also be the first day of Meet the Management at Union Station. As a final note, if you have not commented on our public comment items, group trips, Amtrak Step-Ups, and bicycle policy, please do so by the end of the week.

-Dale