

## Let's Talk!

The next VRE online forum will start on Wednesday, January 4th at 12:00pm.



There are currently 39 questions waiting to be answered.

### **VRE Management:**

Happy New Year! Welcome to all the new and old riders alike. We set the bar pretty high in 2011 with record on time performance and ridership and our goal in 2012 is take VRE to higher levels of customer service and on time performance.

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### **Bill from Burke asks:**

Happy New Year, Dale ... curious to hear about your top three priorities for VRE in 2012?

### **VRE Management:**

Happy New Year to you, too, Bill! Maintaining on-time performance, adding more cars and trains, and making our system even more customer service friendly.

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### **EJ from Broad Run asks:**

Why is the VRE so expensive? It is \$234 a month to ride from Broad Run to Union Station. People I know ride the MARC train and it travels the same distance as the VRE and it is not anywhere near as expensive.

### **VRE Management:**

While MARC and VRE are both commuter rails, both are setup and funded differently. MARC is directly controlled by the MTA, a state agency, whereas VRE is primarily funded by local jurisdictions. This means MARC gets more public money to pay for their operation. While MARC and VRE probably have similar operating costs, more of that is passed on directly to the VRE rider.

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

I have encountered people having long conversations on their cell phones multiple

times at the top of their voice. The last thing I want to hear about when I get on the train after a long day of work is about someone else's issues. Is there anything that can be done? I've even worn headphones and can still hear people sometimes.

**VRE Management:**

Cell phone courtesy is something that is not apparent to everyone, because the technology is so new. All we can do is to play announcements and publish courtesy reminders.

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**Bob from Fairfax, VA asks:**

Has there been any consideration to adding a quiet car (or converting an existing one) to #322?

**VRE Management:**

No plans on expanding the Quiet Car program at this time.

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**Jay from Stafford asks:**

Will the federal smart benefits come back again?

**VRE Management:**

I have no idea. We'll just have to watch Congress and see if they reinstitute it.

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**James from Manassas, VA asks:**

Mr. Zehner, happy new year! Why are emergency windows announced during the 'Emergency Procedures' message when it is encouraged to use the regular doors first, then move to another car second, then the windows? (let's hope none are ever needed!). Thank you.

**VRE Management:**

It is much easier to use the doors to exit the train during an emergency than it is a window. Knock on wood it never happens, but we all should be prepared.

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**Matt from Woodbridge, VA asks:**

I noticed the conductors on Train #306/307 rarely make announces as they seem to rely on the automated announcements. Their were a few instants when we going slow and stopped, but the conductors made no announcements as to why we went so slowly. However, conductor Brain is good making announcements when he was on this train. When you had Amtrak conductors they used to make allot of

announcements.

**VRE Management:**

I'll emphasize to Keolis that conductors need to make announcements when there is delays or slowing in the train trip so riders know what is going on.

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**Sean from Manassas, VA** asks:

How come daily download is not being updated for almost 2 weeks?

**VRE Management:**

It will be updated today.

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**JP from Broad Run** asks:

I recently got a parking ticket from the Price William County Police when I was parked at the train station. Are the police routinely giving out parking tickets now at the broad Run station? It seems that parking is getting more and more limited and from the way everyone parks it looks like as long as you are not blocking anyone you can park just about anywhere. Why are the police giving out tickets then?

**VRE Management:**

Police enforce parking restrictions and will ticket any one in violation. They are also there to deter any crime that may happen.

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**Sick & Sleepy from Broad Run, VA** asks:

Some of your riders, I included have a tendency to be lulled to sleep by the train ride into work and also going home. I would like to suggest that the idea of VRE creating something that passengers could wear or place on the cupholder that says e.g. "Wake at L'Enfant" & also if a buzzer could be posted in each car if a passenger oversleeps and wakes up just in time at their stop to watch the doors close to ring a bell for the conductor to open the doors quickly to let a last minute passenger get off the train, that would be great.

**VRE Management:**

I view it as a rider responsibility to exit the train at their station. Conductors have a number of duties on the train to include operations and ticket checking, but to make them responsible for 1,000 wake up calls for all the riders on the train is too much to ask.

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**Dave from Woodbridge, Va** asks:

Each morning on the last car of the Express train (300) the same individuals stand in the isles and the vestibule from Woodbridge till L'Enfant. They make it very difficult for others to get by and get off at their Alexandria and Crystal City stops. I thought that no one was supposed to stand in the vestibule while the train was moving due to safety reasons.

**VRE Management:**

I'll discuss with Keolis and have the conductors work to ensure people are not standing in the vestibule.

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**Fredericksburg from Fredericksburg** asks:

Its a new year and a fresh start You guys are doing a great job, we know that WIFI will take a while, BUt i keep hearing alot about a fare hike, and with the government cut back of the metro benefit form 230 to 125 a month is this still going to happen? I really hope not! but all and all I hope the new year will be a great one for VRE.  
thank you

**VRE Management:**

Thanks for the compliments. Last month I recommended to the VRE Operations Board to be effective 1 July 2012. We have not had a fare increase in 3 years and I don't like doing them but I want to sustain the service at the levels we have today because that is what the riders demand.

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**kk from broad run** asks:

Manassas 324 - please can we get the cars switched so that the car with the restroom is NOT the quiet car? Quiet car seats are at a premium the way it is, plus the extra traffic and noise generated by people using the restroom ruins the whole ambience of the quiet car. Thanks!

**VRE Management:**

Every effort we will be made not to have a bathroom in the Quiet Car location. It may take a while to move the cars but we will eventually get there.

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**Frugal from Fairfax Station** asks:

I have a rather substantial amount of unused Smart Vouchers. I had a feeling the \$230 benefit cap wouldn't last but my train ticket only costs about \$180 leaving me with an extra \$50 unused every month. Now that I'm only getting \$120, those saved benefits were supposed to help cover the cost of my tickets this year. Someone in your office told me collecting surplus benefit was against the law. Why? It's my

benefit! How do I get the value back on those?

**VRE Management:**

Transit benefits were always meant to be used on a month by month basis. Anything not used in that month should be returned to your employer. Since VRE is not taking anymore paper SmartBenefits vouchers, you have to return them to your employer.

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**Paul from Manassas, VA asks:**

Waiting by the track at Manassas, this morning, as the train arrived at the station my eardrums were pierced by the horn blasts as the train was slowing to a stop. I understand that there is a safety/rules concern, but when the engineer can see that the crossing gates are down and that all traffic is stopped, he still gives it an extra two blasts while the train is only going about 1 mile an hour, 20 feet from the end. I mean, there's safety and then there's overzealousness! Please ask him to back off just a bit. This didn't happen 3 weeks ago. Did you change engineers? (train #330)

**VRE Management:**

I'll look into it.

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**Karen from L'Enfant asks:**

The stairs going up to the station at L'Enfant are beginning to deteriorate again. Shoe heels can get stuck in the cracks and crumbling.

**VRE Management:**

I'll look into this. I understand that this is a safety concern.

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**Larry from Broad Run asks:**

When will the Broad Run Platform extension be complete?

**VRE Management:**

Within two months.

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**April from Bristow asks:**

When will train 324 be switched to the new cars? We have been "enjoying" the old cars for over a year.

**VRE Management:**

We prefer to have all the new cars operate all the turn trains to get the most use out

of the new cars. Since we are looking to replace all of the older fleet, it may have to remain on 324/335 since that is the only 6 car Manassas train that goes north and south only once each day.

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**Thomas from Woodbridge** asks:

On the issue of the manual door switch, the passengers are not the only ones guilty of this -- conductors are doing this as well. I would appreciate this being addressed with the conductors also.

**VRE Management:**

I know this is a problem on a lot of trains. Ideally especially in cold or hot weather it is best to keep the doors closed but a lot of people know how to manually lock the doors open. I will talk to Keolis about conductors keeping the doors closed as much as possible.

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**Kate from Fredericksburg VA** asks:

Thank you for the excellent job of the VRE crew. The conductors are the best and always provide kind and curious customer service. That being said, I wish the passengers could be as kind and courteous. Manassas riders, please stop standing in the way of the Fredericksburg riders at Crystal City. It doesn't make sense to be in the front blocking the way, don't worry you will be able to get on your train. I think if we could all be aware of our surroundings and take a cue from the VRE staff it would make for a much better ride. Thank you.

**VRE Management:**

Courtesy reminder to start of the New Year. And thanks for the compliments, I will pass it on to the crews.

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**Ken from Fairfax** asks:

Please check into why train 324 is not showing up on the train brain until it gets to Backlick. Being Winter, we get pretty cold (and nervous) when we can't see it on the map. The 'train is on time' report isn't comforting since it appears something has to happen to change the status. We worry what's been forgotten at 6AM and 15 degrees!

**VRE Management:**

I'll check into this. It could be a bad modem on the locomotive but I will watch it to make sure its on Rail Time.

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**Tracey from Bristow, VA** asks:

What is the status of WiFi on VRE trains? Free WiFi would be great, but I would also be willing to pay a nominal charge to use it. I would also like to recommend more power outlets be installed, preferably closer to the seats. VRE is a great alternative to driving and makes my commute so much easier. Keep up the good work!

**VRE Management:**

While, I was optimistic for WiFi in 2011, in 2012, the priority for WiFi is dropping. During our last survey most riders said they wouldn't use it if it wasn't free. Also, I am not convinced that we can provide uninterrupted service at this time.

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**David from Lorton, VA** asks:

Please tell the engineer of Train #306 to stop operating the train so slowly, when you should be going faster, especially between Alex & Crystal City after switching tracks. MAN train should have already left Crystal City, so there is no need to go slow. This is a constant problem that needs fixing. Going so slowly delays us as it did Tuesday, Jan 3. If we went faster we'd arrive at L'Enfant at 7:27 instead of 7:35.

**VRE Management:**

We reviewed the operating records of these trains it is not a deliberate action on the part of the engineer. This train is operating in accordance with the signals.

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

In regards to announcements, when they are made we can't always hear them in the cars. Why aren't regular checks of the speaker systems conducted to ensure speakers are working?

**VRE Management:**

We do check cars decibel levels on a regular basis but you can always send [gotrains@vre.org](mailto:gotrains@vre.org) an email with the car number and we will address it.

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**Aaron from Manassas Park** asks:

Does VRE expect a drop in ridership with the decrease of the federal employee transit subsidy? Did you see much of an increase when the subsidy went up a few years ago?

**VRE Management:**

In 2008 we raised fares 16% over a 13 month period because of increase in fuel

prices and the ridership went up which even surprised me. So will ridership go down with the decrease of the federal transit subsidy? Not very much because of the congestion on 95 and 66.

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**Angela** from **Lorton, VA** asks:

Is it possible to get people to talk quietly even though they are not on the Quiet Car? Can we ask conductors to ask passengers to please talk (and laugh) in a lower voice?

**VRE Management:**

We can play courtesy reminders to have people be cognizant of their surroundings, but beyond that, this is public transportation. You can politely ask others to keep it down or simply move to another car.

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**Adam** from **Fredericksburg, VA** asks:

Parking at Fredericksburg is virtually impossible for the last two trains. Even though I live inside city limits, I have to go to Leland every day just to find parking. Ridership is at record levels, but in the last year two lots of parking have been lost, and the one replacement is smaller than either of those. With record ridership on the same consists, how is it that there is no budget for pursuing more parking lot leases more aggressively?

**VRE Management:**

The problem in Fredericksburg is owners of parking lots are terminating their leases with us to use the property for other purposes. There are very few other opportunities for Fredericksburg parking lots near the station.

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**Bob** from **Dumfries, VA** asks:

Recently a conductor stated to passengers, in a very crowded vestibule, that it was "against federal law" to be there and to move back into the overcrowded car. While I certainly see this from a safety standpoint, if this is a "federal law" it should be clearly posted on all trains to have passengers comply. If not, please instruct staff on the correct way to address the situation.

**VRE Management:**

While it is not federal law, as you stated, we require passengers to keep out of the vestibule for safety reasons.

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**GS** from **Manassas, VA** asks:

Hi Dale. I recently was offered tickets from Zone 1-4 from a person that was retiring. I declined as I use Zone 1-6. Could I have purchased extra tickets for Zone 4-6 and used both tickets? Thanks!

**VRE Management:**

Yes, but validate both (at the appropriate station) and show both to the conductor.

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**Mike from Burke, VA asks:**

I mainly ride train 326 in the morning and 333 in the evening. Ticket checking is very sporadic and nothing close to what the Amtrak conductors did. What occupies the time of the conductor staff that keeps them from checking tickets? Also even when ticket checking is going on the conductor staff avoids the galleys. great place for scofflaws to hide.

**VRE Management:**

Conductors are required to check tickets on a regular basis. I will talk to Keolis about making changes to these two trains.

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**Kelly from Fredericksburg Line asks:**

I don't understand why the schedule before Christmas and New Years was changed to an S schedule. It was not a holiday and many of us were still required to go to work. Because of the shortened schedule, I was forced to get into work much earlier than I had to and had to use leave to catch an earlier train because I couldn't take a late train since my daughter is in daycare and I have to get to her before they close. VRE is partially funded by the state and you all changed your schedule?? Metro, the Fairfax Connector didn't chnage schedules, why did you?

**VRE Management:**

On those days, we typically see half of our normal ridership. We reduce the amount of trains to reduce the operating costs.

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**Jim from Fredericksburg asks:**

19 degrees this morning and once again, the floor heaters on 304 were not on! Why does VRE have such an aversion to employing the floor heaters? After all, our feet are usually the coldest since when the doors open, the cold air rushes in and then sinks. I just don't get why you have them and then not use them.

**VRE Management:**

I will have our mechanical team look into it.

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**Jeff from Springfield, VA** asks:

Thank you for the great service. Three questions. (1) Anything new on the transit benefit subsidy? (2) I almost fell after tripping over a metal guard on the steps of the L'Enfant VRE stop. Who should be contacted before someone is seriously injured? (3) The area behind the L'Enfant stop looks like it could be put to better use. Could the wind breaks be moved from the platform and placed back there, freeing up much needed room on the platform? Thanks for the response.

**VRE Management:**

I have answered your first two questions in previous questions. For question 3, I will look to see if we can provide more platform space at L'Enfant.

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**Debbie from Manassas** asks:

Can the baseboard heat please be turned on while it's cold outside? It hasn't been on and the air blowing out of the overhead vents is not that warm and it's pretty cold coming in from Manassas. Thanks!

**VRE Management:**

It definitely is cold outside and will make sure the heaters on our trains are on. Can you please send an email to [gotrains@vre.org](mailto:gotrains@vre.org) as to which train and possibly car number so we can forward to our mechanical department?

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**Phil from Burke** asks:

How is it going on adding the "last chance to switch trains" automated announcement prior to the fork in the rail? U said good idea and it would be done several months ago. Thanks.

**VRE Management:**

No, the automated announcement is not complete yet. Still working on it but conductors should be making announcements between Crystal City and Alexandria.

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**WiFi from a train** asks:

Am I coming soon? I heard spring 2011, summer 2011, and then nothing. Thanks,

**VRE Management:**

Funding has become an issue and made WiFi slide down the priority list. I am not sure when I can get it done at this point.

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**Tim** from **FBG/VA** asks:

What kind of drop in ridership is VRE expecting now that Congress has cut back transit benefits?...continuing the blame for the economic mess on civil servants.

Thanks.

**VRE Management:**

I expect to see a minor drop, but with traffic getting worse in this area, not sure how much of a drop it will be.

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**Jim** from **Burke Centre** asks:

Dale, last I heard you had given up on wifi for the trains due to reliability concerns. With wifi off the table, what are your IT priorities for the coming months? No offense intended, but it seems several of your systems could use an upgrade (web site, train tracker, ticket kiosks, etc.)

**VRE Management:**

We updated our website about a year and a half ago. Rail Time just needs a new detailed mapping feature that will hopefully be fixed soon. Finally, we are looking at new vending machines but right now defining our needs for a new/upgraded system.

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**Mikhail** from **Spotsylkraine** asks:

Another new year, another lost parking lot in Fredericksburg. The City is fed up with commuters taking their parking spots. Commuters are frustrated with the terrible parking options. Most of us come from that barren land to the south of the shining city. It seems like accelerating the train station planned for the hinterlands is a win-win-win. And yet, progress seems pinned to the fleeting horizon. Is there really nothing that can be done to speed up this much-anticipated project?

**VRE Management:**

Spotsylvania is working on getting funding for their station. This is the only solution for the parking congestion in Fredericksburg, but will take time.

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**Kevin** from **fredericksburg, VA** asks:

As a permanently disabled veteran with the VRE Disabled Rider ID, it is continually frustrating to me to not be able to get a seat, especially when there are people much younger fitter than I sitting in the Priority Seating areas. What can be done about this? My disability is pretty obvious, but there have been days when VRE employees have sat there, military, including a US Army major (I guess the "Officer and a

Gentleman" went out the window a long long time ago), and yet none of them would volunteer their seat.

**VRE Management:**

I am sorry that no one is courteous enough to offer you a seat. You can always ask a conductor to please approach individuals in the priority seating area to give up their seat for you.

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**Marilyn from Fredericksburg VA asks:**

Noticed that the 1st VRE in the afternoon in Alex is really overcrowded. Everyone that catches the first 3 early trains in the morning are all on this first train. Any solutions for more cars so we don't have to stand? I know you keep adding but we need more! thanks- been riding since you started.

**VRE Management:**

We monitor ridership levels of all trains and notice that 303 does regularly get full. Problem is at this time, I cannot add cars. So if I add to one train, I have to take away from another. And a lot of our trains are full.

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**Peter from Manassas, VA asks:**

What's the chance we could permit bikes in the train foyers? The doors only open on one side at a time, and the bikes could be moved between Alexandria and Backlick Rd (at least on the Manassas side) so that they are never in anyone's way. There has been talk that bikes are at the conductor's discretion, but it would be helpful to have more guidance to get greater consistency, since not all conductors are of the same opinion.

**VRE Management:**

I want to avoid having bicycles and people ride in the vestibules. In case of emergency, the bikes would prohibit people from exiting, no matter what side it is on.

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**Dave from Woodbridge, VA asks:**

We'll miss getting emails from April Maguigad. We wish her well at Caltrain. It's too bad the VRE can't run all day and weekends like Caltrain does.

**VRE Management:**

Yes, I will also miss April personally. She and I worked together for over 10 years. I'm sure she will enjoy that 65+ degree weather in California, as opposed to 20

degree weather here.

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**Dan from Manassas, Virginia** asks:

General Comment: VRE is the best! This year should be the best ever for On-time Performance because of the new engines and is a good year to stick with the best run commuter rail system in the nation! Question 1: Are VRE'ers still buying record numbers of the Reduced Step Up Tickets (only \$5) to ride specific Amtrak trains, such as Train 176 and 171 that service Burke Centre and Manassas? Question 2: Summer 2012 will be the 20 year anniversary of VRE. Is VRE planning a big media event? They should.

**VRE Management:**

Thanks, Dan. I always appreciate your continued support. Record numbers? It is about 50% more than when they were \$10, but percentage wise, not as much as when we charged \$2 for a Step-Up. Probably record numbers for 171 and 176 since those weren't available when we charged \$2. As for our 20 year anniversary, we hope to celebrate our accomplishments and keep moving towards becoming the best ride in the country.

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**Larry from Fredericksburg** asks:

Dale, would you ask the conductors to enforce the rules of queing in the vestibule while keeping the door open. I ride Train 300, quiet car. It is too danged cold to keep those doors open. The automated courtesy announcements aren't cutting it.

**VRE Management:**

I will talk to the conductors about it.

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**Randy from Rippon** asks:

Less regular riders would be less confused if the TVMs did not offer "rount trip tickets" and then ask if the rider wants to validate the ticket at time of purchase. That implies to the rider that the ticket is validated, period. They don't know that it needs to be validated both ways. I would suggest not offering r/t tickets, but sticking with the 2 trip option. There would be less confusion and the only fare evaders you catch are first time tourists/riders. These are not the ones that you want to catch. Or do you?

**VRE Management:**

The TVMs do sell "2 Trip" tickets not "Round Trip" for exactly the reason you stated.

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**bryon** from **Broadrun** asks:

Is WI-FI off the table or did you just put it a little lower on your priority list?

**VRE Management:**

Right now it is lower on my priority list, but given the funding picture, I don't know when we'll be able to get it done.

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**Paul** from **Burke** asks:

Lately noticing a trend of people "sharing" their music and radios with fellow passengers. Can we remind people to bring/use earphones?

**VRE Management:**

Yes, they should be using earphones. I will have courtesy reminders played.

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**disabled** from **Manassas** asks:

with respect to the new ticket vending machines, will I be able to purchase a reduced rate ticket on them?

**VRE Management:**

No, because you are required to have ID for reduced fare tickets.

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**Woody** from **Manassas** asks:

What's happened to the automatic track tracker? When I click on my train to see if it's on time, I get the system error page and a note that states something about a license.

**VRE Management:**

Please know that green means on time and red means late. If you mouse over (hover over with the arrow) your train it will give you more details without having to click on it. Clicking on your train just lets you zoom in and Microsoft stopped offering support for the detailed map function. IT is working on an alternative to get that function working again.

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**Mark** from **Burke** asks:

Why is a driver's license required to ride VRE? Last week, I heard the conductor challenge a rider to see his driver's license. He had a December monthly ticket. Can

you check into this? We thought things would be better after Conductor (Inspector) Cruz of Amtrak went away, but I'm not so sure now.

**VRE Management:**

I can look into it but even though he had a monthly ticket, it could be an out of zone ticket.

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**VRE Management:**

Well it's the end of my first web chat for 2012. I noticed there are very few questions on on time performance or cleanliness or poor courtesy by conductors. These were all areas that I have been working on with Keolis to improve in 2011. We have made great progress. Both VRE and Keolis want our train service to be the premier commuter rail in the US. We are both committed to continue to make improvements even during these fiscal difficult times.

As always, thanks for riding VRE. We look forward to a great 2012.

-Dale

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