

Virginia Railway Express

Let's Talk!

The next VRE online forum will start on Wednesday, January 9th at 12 noon.



There are currently 65 questions waiting to be answered.

VRE Management:

Happy New Year! There are many exciting things that will be going on this year as we get more new railcars and work towards new locomotives.

I am looking forward to provide even better service this year.

Now on with the questions . . .

Matthew Roche from **Burke, VA** asks:

What is being done to increase the reliability of the train service? It seems the amount and time of delays are not improving.

VRE Management:

There was a slight dip in on-time performance in December and January was off to rough start. But it is improving! I am continuing to work to reduce equipment related delays. It is taking longer than we expected to get the leased diesels into service. I hope that they will be running sometime next month.

John from **Manassas** asks:

What is the status of the new cars? Could you put an article in the newsletter that is distributed on the trains?

VRE Management:

We have received the first set of five cars, and they are in service. The next group of five is expected to arrive January 16th and will put in service by January 30th.

Don from **Fairfax Station, VA** asks:

Last week the Washington Post reported the possibility of a strike by AMTRAC employees at the end of the month. Could you please comment on this and how it might affect VRE operations?

VRE Management:

Since our conductors and mechanical staff are Amtrak employees, a strike would affect our service. We are working on possible options in case the strike comes to pass. There will be an article outlining the situation in tomorrow's VRE Update.

Nat from **Fredericksburg, VA** asks:

Does VRE realize that it is suppose to be a solution to the traffic congestion problem? If so, why does it not understand that people build their employment commuting around VRE, so that even during holidays they count on VRE (given the holiday traffic its even more important for VRE to provide some service), so why do you always discontinue service rather than providing some service and on most major holidays maybe increase service for non-commuters that simply want to use VRE to come in to the District?

VRE Management:

To put it bluntly, the funds are not available for us to provide service on major holidays. It may interest you to

know that ridership on Christmas Eve was less than 5% of our total ridership. Since we have a very tight operating budget, it's not possible to offer service on days when there would be practically no one on board.

Justin from Frdericksburg, VA asks:

Are you planning on enforcing the standing means detraining campaign? I ride Fredericksburg line 303—every day when I get off at Leeland (including during the “campaign”) riders that detrain at Fredericksburg are lined up. The proof is in the vestibule in the third car from the front of the train—it is like the bleachers at a sporting event. If you are going to enforce the campaign do it, don't provide lip service.

VRE Management:

I'll speak with Amtrak to make sure that the crew is aware of the problem you continue to encounter. In the meanwhile, you may wish to speak to a crew member yourself before you board in the evening.

Dan from Lake Ridge, VA asks:

I am disappointed that the new cars weren't put on Train #304. Please put the next batch on Train #304. I like the comfortable seats and look foward to riding them to work.

VRE Management:

Currently, the plan is to add new cars to the trainset that operates as 304/301/309. You can expect them to be in service by the end of the month.

Thomas from Lorton, VA asks:

Are you aware of any plans by Fairfax County to address the exit of the Lorton Station? Some nights you can wait up to 20 minutes before you can exit.

VRE Management:

We will monitor the situation and work with Fairfax County as necessary.

PJ from Manassas, VA asks:

Any possibility of adding more quiet cars on each train? Thx PJ

VRE Management:

I know tjhat quiet cars are very popular. Even so, we are not adding more quiet cars to our trains.

from asks:

The parking at the Burke Center station has gotten MUCH worse since the beginning of the year. It appears that ridership is up and that construction has blocked off more spaces. Is the garage construction still on time? When is it expected to be completed?

VRE Management:

You are right. Ridership is up and the contractor is using more parking spaces. The garage pre-cast should be completed by the end of the month and the crane removed. The project is on schedule for completion early this summer. We will continue to work with County police on the parking.

Davin from Woodbridge, VA asks:

Can the CEO do anything to stop the fare increase that the VRE board voted on? Like the CEO I agree that isn't a good time for a fare raise. Just because Metro raised fares, doesn't mean VRE has too.

VRE Management:

I understand your concerns. We will hold public hearings in February-March time period on this. Please speak up by email, or in person, at this time because I summarize all comments and concerns to our Operations Board before a final decision is made.

Michele from **Woodbridge, Virginia** asks:

I would like to know why the Commuter Store in Ballston Commons Mall cannot print train tickets for passengers as they request them for their particular zones and they can only sell pre-printed tickets for as long as they are available? Example, I was in the Store on Saturday, January 5, 2008 and requested train tickets from Rippon (Zone 5) to Union Station (Zone 1). I was told that they "sold out" of my zone and I could only purchase from the zones she physically had in her hand.

VRE Management:

VRE ticket machines are physically located at Commuter Direct's main office in Arlington and the Crystal City commuter store. The Ballston Commons satellite location requests VRE tickets ahead of time from the main office and keeps only a limited amount of tickets on hand.

Dave from **Stafford** asks:

I was very close to quitting VRE last year, after giving it a one-year 'trial' period. But I have to admit, VRE on-time service has improved...not perfect, certainly not to Western European standards, but it is better. Keep working on that success! Thanks.

VRE Management:

Thank you! We will keep working on improving service.

Donna from **Nokesville, VA** asks:

Last month someone asked about a green arrow for the traffic light on Piper Lane (main exit for Broad Run station) which may be needed when the new Target opens. It was hard to tell if you took the issue seriously. I hope you will. Piper Lane traffic is directly related to two other problems: Speeding in the parking lot and Broad Run passengers queuing in the aisle while Old Town Manassas passengers are trying to get off the train. I hope VRE will work with Prince William County to get that green arrow for drivers turning south onto Rt. 28 from Piper Lane. Thank you.

VRE Management:

I take all questions seriously. While I only have a limited amount of influence over other organizations like VDOT, I will continue to work on this.

I know that the Piper Lane light is an issue that contributes to the speeding and queuing problems. However, riders still need to be safe and courteous regardless of the circumstances.

Tom from **Burke** asks:

Illegal parking at Burke Centre continues to pose dangers to other cars, walkers, and the parking area itself. It is also not fair to those who follow the rules and park elsewhere when no spaces are available. What will you do to punish and deter the illegal parkers?

VRE Management:

Fairfax County enforces parking at Burke Centre. I'll have our Superintendent of Operations, Safety and Security speak to the County police about your concerns.

Pat from **Springfield** asks:

I've often heard and read on your website that at VRE, the top priority is our safety. What are your next two priorities?

VRE Management:

On-Time Performance and Customer Service.

Margie from **Burke, VA** asks:

Why doesn't the VRE install heat lamps, such as those used at outdoor restaurants, on the train platforms?

VRE Management:

Thanks for the suggestion. While it would make waiting for the train in cold weather much more pleasant, this resolution is cost-prohibitive. This is a common problem for commuter rail systems.

Sylvia from Stafford, VA asks:

VRE Concentration has been on obtaining new cars for passengers; however, a more important issue seems to be replacing old engines. What is VRE's plan for replacing old engines in order to avoid constant equipment breakdowns and late trains?

VRE Management:

In addition to the leasing of more locomotives, I hope to soon award a contract for new engines in February.

Jef from Woodbridge, VA asks:

How are you going to integrate the VRE TLC pass with Metro's SmartTrip card? When will this be done? When are you going to repaint the stairs at Rippon station with a better quality paint?

VRE Management:

At this time, there is no plan to integrate the VRE TLC with Metro's SmarTrip cards. Once the specifications for a regional fare collection system become available, we are planning on upgrading our fare collection system (including vendors) to accept SmarTrip cards as a form of payment for VRE tickets, but the TLC will continue to exist in its current form as a VRE ticket type.

AI from Alexandria, VA asks:

What is VRE doing in case Amtrak strikes at the end of the month?

VRE Management:

The Presidential Emergency Board reported out on December 30 that both sides are reviewing the report and they must maintain a "cooling off" period for 30 days. I will be on a conference call with Amtrak next week and hopefully, I will have a better idea of how they viewed the report and the possibility of a strike.

I am looking into alternatives in case of a strike. But I must be honest, finding alternative transportation for 8,000 people without ready resources is very difficult.

JJ from Falmouth asks:

People are still illegally parking in the cross-hatched areas at Leeland St. Even with the overflow lot and spaces open at the back of the lot, there are always those who want the VIP experience. Why is it that when we write in to VRE during these chats, the response is always it's a Stafford county issue and there are suppose to be patrolled yada yada. Reasure me right now that you are contacting the sherifs office and there will be tickets awaiting these violators tonight.

VRE Management:

I can not make any guarantees on what another entity will do. The most I can do is forward on your concerns, which I will continue to do.

Brenda from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

What is the policy if a rider attempted to buy a ticket and the credit card machine was not working at the station? Does the rider not have to have a ticket? I witnessed this the other night when a young lady said that all 4 machines at Crystal City did not work and the conductor simply said have a nice ride.

VRE Management:

When you are unable to purchase a ticket from the TVMs, a rider should speak to a conductor before boarding. The crew member has the discretion to allow a rider to board with the understanding that the rider will purchase/validate their ticket at their destination. Sounds like the rider did the correct thing.

Dan from Bristow, VA asks:

I know you've had previous questions on the implementation of SmarTrip cards on VRE, but I'm not sure that you answered them fully. When riders ask about "compatibility", they don't mean the ability of one electronic machine to communicate with another, they mean that VRE uses a proof-of-payment fare system, with printed, validated farecards. You can't visually inspect a SmarTrip card to tell whether it has been validated, so it isn't clear how they would be used on VRE. If the idea is simply that you could use your SmarTrip card to purchase a single, ten-trip, or monthly pass at the fare machines, then, OK, but how is this any different than using a credit card or debit cards? Would it really be worth the cost of replacing all the fare machines? If, on the other hand, the SmarTrip card could "store" multiple ten-trip "cards" on it, with the fare machines printing a validation daily, there might be some value (as well as additional cost), but this would also represent a change in VRE's fare system. The cynical among us could also see SmarTrip implementation as a pretext to eliminate ten-trip discounts (which we know you hate), such as what happened with the old 10% bonus on Metrorail—who knows? These are the kinds of questions that riders have when you talk about implementing SmarTrip on VRE in the future. Could you provide us with some specifics on how you would see it working?

VRE Management:

You certainly have a lot of good questions. I could take up the rest of our time answering them. In a nutshell, my ultimate goal is to allow passengers to use their SmarTrip cards as a form of payment, not proof of purchase.

Please call our Fare Collection Specialist (Mr. Easter) and he will be happy to speak to you about this.

DK from Warrenton asks:

Supposedly, starting 7 January the policy was going to go in effect that people standing in the aisle would mean a "wish to detrain" and the conductors would hold the train until the people either detrained or took their seats. This is NOT being enforced -- on both Monday and Tuesday the aisles filled at Manassas before departure and the train was NOT held. In fact, the people standing made a joke about "look for the conductor to make sure he doesn't see you so we can leave." Don't you think that if VRE institutes a policy it should be enforced? Otherwise, your credibility hits rock bottom.

VRE Management:

Thanks for letting me know. I will work with Amtrak on this.

Sam from Burke asks:

Will the Burke Centre shuttle's continue to run once the garage is finished?

VRE Management:

It is my understanding that Fairfax County will cease funding the Burke Centre shuttles once the garage is completed.

Frosty Fly from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

Why is it taking a year to fix the warranty issues on the cab cars? So far every new cab to come on line has had problems with the door seals. In the past month, we've had days where the car temp did not get over 55 degrees insides and other days had swarms of bugs.

VRE Management:

This problem has been much harder for us to fix than we originally believed. It is a warranty item, but we have not received a viable long term solution. We will keep working on it.

Fred from Leland, Virginia asks:

On 1/03/08 train 304 was delayed by more than 1 hr. and an announcement was made on the train that morning that fre-ride certificates would be handed out the next morning because the crew was bussy and unable to hand them out. The next morning on train 304 an announcement was made that FRC's would not be handed out because Management informed the crew that FRC's were to only be handed out the date of the delay and that passesngers were to contact VRE to get FRC's. Is this some kind of attempt to detour the passengers getting there much deserved FRC's? Waiting for my FRC

VRE Management:

In July of last year - when the FRC changed to 60 minutes, we also changed the method of distribution. Now, if the crew is not able to hadn out FRCs at the time of the delay, passengers must request one from our office.

The crew was reminded of this change in policy. If you still have not receive your FRC, please visit the FRC page on our website (under Special Programs).

Yay from F'burg, VA asks:

Is adding an earlier train to the F'burg line still a possibility? Thanks!

VRE Management:

If we get the funding I have asked for, we will make every attempt to add an earlier Fredericksburg train in January 2009.

Roger from VA asks:

The new passenger cars are clean, comfortable, and great addition. However, the heating system seems to run on the cool side. Is a matter of changing the setting or inherent in the capabilities? Also, the windows seem poorly insulated. During cold weather, beside a draft, considerable condensation builds up inside the window. This doesn't seem normal. Can these be corrected for the next set of cars? Thanks,

VRE Management:

Thanks for the comments. I'll look at the temperature settings. The windows are insulated and condensation should not build up on the inside of the window. The HVAC system has driers that should eliminate the humidity. I'll check on this as well.

Peter from Burke asks:

Last month you had an excellent article in the seat notice about the "Partners in Performance" pact which included CSX, Amtrak and VRE. Absent of any mention was Northfolk & Southern. Why has N&S not joined this group? Shouldn't they have the same goals as the rest of you?

VRE Management:

The goal is to improve performance between Richmond and Washington. Norfolk Southern does not operate along these tracks and was not involved as a result.

Dan from Manassas, VA asks:

What's up with the \$25 increase in the price of the TLC pass. At current prices, the TLC gives the commuter whose final destination is one of the downtown DC Metro stations only a marginal savings (less than 20 cents/day) over buying a VRE monthly pass and paying for Metrorail separately (and that's assuming a month with no holidays or days off). With the new prices, the same commuter loses money (almost 40 cents/day) buying a TLC. Are you trying to get rid of the TLC?

VRE Management:

Metro charges us \$80.00 per TLC for the Metrorail fare, we are passing that cost on to our passengers. I understand that Metro's recent fare increase has made the TLC less attractive and eliminated coast savings for some passengers. However, we are not currently looking at eliminating the ticket at this time.

Robert from Fredricksburg, VA asks:

Over the past month, I've seen an increasing amount of women using the train as a "prep" area to apply their make-up. I believe VRE has informed riders to please do their grooming and prep. work at home. Not sure why these certain women feel exempt? Most people don't want to sit around a woman while she powders her face and applies make-up that often stinks, or that we could be allergic to. Can you please remind these "privileged" women that it's impolite, and also once again, inform your staff to remind others that it's not allowed. Thanks for the improved on-time performance.

VRE Management:

Glad that our improved performance has been noticed. I will forward your request to our staff to include it as part

of our Courtesy Campaign.

Dan from Manassas, VA asks:

The structured parking garage in Old Towne Manassas seems to be going faster than expected. It will be a great benefit to VRE commuters and to Old Towne businesses. What is the current estimated completion date (Month, Year)?

VRE Management:

The pre-cast should be finished by early March and then the whole project should be done early this summer.

Carlyj1958 from Fredericksburg asks:

I know this question will sound all too familiar, but is there any update on whether or not Spotsyl-tucky will join VRE? Parking is becoming all too scarce and there needs to be ample methods of getting to work. The Fred bus charges a dollar each way so I would rather find parking in downtown Fredericksburg to save the extra money. Any word yet?

VRE Management:

Still the same - no news. While I can understand saving extra money, the FRED bus is a less expensive alternative to the Sophia Street parking garage which is \$4.00 a day.

Tim from Rippon asks:

I appreciate that VRE is trying to enforce a "standing means detrainning" policy, but I don't believe it is the job of the conductors to babysit the immature passengers.

VRE Management:

We tried being nice by reminding people. Seems that the only thing left is to babysit them.

Eric from Bristow, VA asks:

After new expansion at Broad Run finally open but a year later it is over 100% capacity! What is current status of parking lot (potential expansion) at Broad Run, Manassas, and Manassas Park? I see parking deck is being built in Manassas and hope that it would relieve the parking pressure on Broad Run and Manassas Park. I doubt that there would be anymore expansion on Broad Run? Gainesville-Haymarket line would greatly relieve the pressure on Broad Run parking lot.

VRE Management:

You are right. There is no more room for additional parking at Broad Run and the parking deck at Manassas will help some what. The Gainesville-Haymarket extension will alleviate some of the congestion. However, it will be some time before this additional service is available.

Chris from Manassas, VA asks:

I have accumulated some FRCs over the last few months that expire this summer. Since I always purchase a monthly TLC and don't have enough FRCs to cover a month or even a few days, is there any way I can "cash" them in before they expire?

VRE Management:

Unfortunately, there is no way to "cash in" or exchange your expiring FRCs. Since you regularly use a monthly pass, you may wish to use them in a month when you plan to take vacation.

Bill from Manassas, VA asks:

I ride the 326 in the mornings that normally operate with a couple of the nice gallery class railcars, but over the last couple of weeks they have only had one which gets crowded really quick. I thought we were getting a new shipment of cars in. Why did we lose one?

VRE Management:

Railcars are routinely switched around for maintenance and other operational issues. As we are getting in five new cars every month, you should have additional new cars on your train in the near future.

Mark from Annandale asks:

Seems like ridership is up 10-20% this week. Trains and lots are fuller. Any comment on service changes to satisfy more demand? Thanks.

VRE Management:

Seems that were a lot of people that had New Year's resolutions to find a better way to commute. We normally see a bump in January. We will keep an eye on ridership and make adjustments where we can.

VRE Management:

That's all the time I have for today! We will meet again at noon on February 6. Thanks for all the great questions!
Dale

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