Fare Increase Public Hearing Summary Notes

February 18, 2015, 7 pm – Stafford County Government Center

The only attendee was Scott Shenk of the Freelance Star Newspaper. No comments or questions.

February 19, 2015, noon, L’Enfant Holiday Inn

Six attendees.

Questions asked:

Q. MARC trains cost $7 from DC to Baltimore. How does their State funding compare to Virginia’s? Why do MARC trains costs less than VRE? Does it have to do with the level of State subsidies?

A. MARC trains are part of their State Government and are more subsidized than VRE. VRE is not part of our State Government and is more locally funded.

Q. I hear the Virginia Assembly is increasing transit funding this year. Will this help VRE?

A. HB1887 provides around $40 million annually to transit capital. VRE would need to compete for these funds along with other transit providers.

Q. Your last two fare increases were directly related to fuel increases. I am glad to see you mention your fuel costs have decreased. However, will you be raising our fares again if gas prices rise in the future?

A. Our fuel consumption has decreased over the last couple of years and while fuel costs have decreased nearly $1 million per year. However, we have locked in our fuel prices by buying fuel futures and we are paying higher than market at this time.

Q. How do you build extra funds into your budget to accommodate the extra riders you forecast to ride VRE?

A. We build ridership by adding the number of cars to our trains. This does not appreciably increase the operations costs. We may have the same number of trains, but they may have more cars.

Q. How does VRE pay for its locomotives and cars?

A. Normally, through 80 percent Federal Transit Administration funding, 10 percent state funding, and 10 percent local funding.

Q. What is the cost of the new Fredericksburg Line train?

A. About $1 million.
Q. The last CEO report noted a $3.3M surplus fund balance. Why don’t you use that funding so a fare increase is not needed?

A. These are funds that are reserved for capital to pay for the next rail cars we purchase. We do not use capital funds to pay for operations expenses as they would be depleted in one year leaving us coming back for a fare increase the next year.

Q. Is there anything we can do, or that could happen, to eliminate the need for a fare increase?

A. We continue to look for savings within the existing budget that could be used to reduce the fare increase proposed.

Q. Why don’t the local jurisdictions provide additional revenue to VRE so that the fare increase would be less or not needed at all?

A. The local jurisdictions informed us that they do not have additional funding to pay VRE.

Q. What is the status of the Federal Commuter Benefit Parity legislation?

A. Congresswoman Holmes Norton is supposed to drop a bill very soon to enact permanent parity between parking and transit at $235 monthly.

Q. I seem to recall getting form emails to send to our members of Congress. Was this something VRE did or another group?

A. It may have been the Virginia Transit Association.

Q. Have the I-95 HOT lanes extension in Stafford had any effect on increasing carpools and HOV3s or an effect on VRE ridership?

A. We just had our second highest ridership day in January. We do not think the HOT lanes will have an effect on VRE ridership.

Q. Are they going to do any more snow plowing at the Manassas Park parking lot expansion?

A. Additional plowing was done over the following weekend.

Q. Will VRE be asking NVTA for funding for parking lot expansions?

A. It is in our six year plan.

Q. What is the status of the Manassas Park Parking lot? Will it be built? When?

A. The city of Manassas Park parking lot is in our six year plan but the city is determining its need for additional parking based upon the planned extension of service to Gainesville – Haymarket and its parking plans.

S. Station parking is too full at all locations on the Manassas Line.
S. The Brooke parking lot is great.

Q. VRE should consider creating an Emergency Ride Home business card that would describe ways to get home in the event of an earthquake or other emergency. You could leave them on the train for references.

A. This is a good idea. We will investigate whether we can work up what you ask in order for the next Meet the Management meetings.

Q. Did VRE realize a decrease in ridership due to the drop in the commuter benefit tax treatment?

A. No. We did see revenue decrease because some riders began to purchase ten and five ride tickets instead monthly fare tickets.

S. VRE should better exploit how employers use the transit subsidy on both a pre-tax and after-tax basis.

Q. Are there plans to link the Crystal City VRE stop to the airport? Can you consider a pedestrian walkway?

A. The mission of VRE is to provide commuter rail service from the suburbs into the city for work and not necessarily for other trips like the airport.

Q. What is the time frame for the Potomac Yard Metro station?

A. This is a questions best addressed to Metro.

February 24, 2015 Burke Commons 7:00 pm

Two attendees.

Q. What is Positive Train Control?

A. PTC is a redundant safety technology that can determine if a train is operating in excess of posted operating speeds or if another train is occupying the same track as another. The technology allows for remote control of the locomotive to slow it down or bring it to a stop.

Q. What are the chances the state will restore its subsidy of the Step-Up ticket if its budget picture improves?

A. This is not likely. The state decreased our operating assistance by $1.1 million and has greater expenses now due to the opening of the Silver Line.

Q. Will VRE be back for another fare increase next year?
A. No. Our financial plans are for the jurisdictional subsidy to increase next year, and then have another fare increase the following year. Fare increases are budgeted every other year, but there are no subsidy increases (except for FY17) in the Six Year Plan.

Q. Are track access costs increasing again after this year?

A. Yes. They are planned to increase four percent per year based on our agreements with our host railroads.

S. I am a big believer in VRE. It is a terrific service. I fully support the fare increase. It seems like you have done what you can to avoid the fare increase. You provide great customer service at VRE and we appreciate it.

Q. Can you look into getting a recycling can on the Union Station platform so I can dispose of my paper properly?

A. Yes. We will look into that.

Q. The printer at Burke Centre on the ticket vending machine is broken. Can you fix it?

A. Yes. It is a thermal printer and some times during cold weather they do not work well since they cannot heat up enough. Please let us know which machine it is.

Q. Who is on the VRE Operations Board from Fairfax County?

A. Chairman Sharon Bulova and Supervisor John Cook are on the VRE Operations Board. Mr. Cook is the VRE chairman this year.

Q. Does VRE ever need assistance from its riders to contact elected officials for funding?

A. Yes. VRE has asked riders via a Train Talk email to sign up with the Virginia Transit Association’s service that will contract riders for legislative advocacy efforts.

February 25, 2015 Crystal City Marriott 12:00 noon

Six attendees (4 were from Arlington Commuter Services)

S. Mr. Dave Salmon provided a written statement (attached). Mr. Salmon is concerned over the cost of VRE compared to METRO service and noise generated by the air horns on locomotives. He stated while the CSX operating policies have provided some relief in the Quiet Zone, it is not nearly enough. He is concerned about the lack of infrastructure improvements in Crystal City as well. He is therefore opposed to the fare increase.

Q. Why a 4% increase in fares and not 2% or no increase at all?

A. VRE staff presented scenarios from 0-10 percent for consideration by its Operations Board. A 2% increase would not be worth going through a public hearing process and would not have
been sufficient to fill the budget gap. The four percent fills the budget gap. We have never has a fare increase above 5%.

Q. Is this public hearing just a formality?
A. No. The VRE Operations Board will decide upon the proposed fare increase based upon the public input received.

S. With high speed rail coming through this corridor, I would like to see Amtrak service in Crystal City. I have to go to Alexandria or Union Station to catch the train. Why not expand the station and include Amtrak? There should be a better connection between VRE and METRO. More trains in Crystal City will receive push back from local residents and VRE and METRO should work with the communities better. We need a better station in Crystal City and improved noise abatement.

Q. If the Operations Board approves the fare increase, when will it occur and how will you educate riders?
A. The increase would become effective July 1, 2015. If approved, VRE will educate riders and the public about the new fares through train talk, email, social media, the press, and the RIDE Magazine prior to the effective date of the fare increase.

Q. What is the proposed timeline on an improved Long Bridge?
A. Within the next decade is an educated guess.

February 26, 2015 City of Manassas 7:00 pm

Four riders, two Boy Scouts, and three Boy Scout family members attended.

Q. Will you extend platforms at all stations?
A. Yes and on both Lines. We plan to extend platforms to accommodate eight car trains. Ten car trains are the largest we can operate.

Q. What is the CIP?
A. Capital Improvement Program.

Q. I ride from L’Enfant. Can you extend and widen the platform?
A. Yes. However, we do not own the property but the property owners may work with us and CSX to allow the expansion and the expansion of the tunnel. The track realignment may move the platform and it could potentially become an island platform.
Q. Closing VRE on February 17th, the day after the President’s Day holiday, due to snow hurts monthly paid riders. Why are you closing more often now than in the past? I am an essential employee and this requires me to drive to work.

A. Many transportation agencies, OPM, MWCOG, VDOT, counties, and cities determine when there will be delayed openings or office closings. On the day in question, Governor McAuliffe declared a state of emergency in Virginia so we closed. For safety, they wanted cars off the road. As many of our station are located on secondary roads, VDOT will not plow them so early in the morning which affects VRE passenger safety.

Q. Have you done a survey to determine the number of essential employees that ride VRE?

A. No.

Q. You seem to run more “S” schedules now compared to years ago. Is that true?

A. No.

Q. Amtrak is late all the time in the afternoons but we like the 10:15 a.m. train. How many people use Amtrak on the Manassas Line?

A. We average about 700 riders per month on the Manassas line.

Q. $2 is not much of an increase on the Step-Up ticket. How much revenue do you get from this increase?

A. Approximately $300,000 per year.

Q. Shouldn’t VRE lobby the State for the $2?

A. We are more concerned over the $2 million we have lost from the State.

Q. Can we get an FRC on snow days?

A. No.

Q. What is the status of the commuter benefit legislation?

A. There are bills pending in Congress to restore the benefit at $235 per month. This is a top priority for VRE and we are aggressively pursuing its passage.

S. I’ve been riding 12 ½ years now. It has been great. The improvements made have been very helpful and I often urge people to ride VRE. VRE is a bargain compared to gas prices even without car depreciation and you have less stress. A monthly pass amounts to a free week.

Q. Are Board members volunteers?

A. They are appointed by the jurisdictions and are not paid by VRE.
S. Name plates on locomotives when you are doing a fare increase, does not seem right.

Q. What is the basis for the CPI?

A. CPI-Urban from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. This is an industry standard for projecting cost-of-living increases.

Q. What is the basis for the contingency costs?

A. Three percent of our total expenditures.

Q. Where did you get the population estimates?

A. From the State.

Q. Will there be any improvements for phone coverage in the dead spots?

A. The implementation of PTC may help with cellular service. We do hope to improve the coverage.

S. The increase would be more acceptable if VRE provided additional services.

Q. Is an explanation of PTC on your website?

A. While there is some information, you may want to conduct a general search from the web for PTC.

Q. Why did they repeat the 20 minute delay message at Crystal City when police action occurred at L’Enfant?

A. We did not know how long the delay would be. If we extend the delay and then the train(s) is released, we do not want to cause riders to miss their train.

Q. I like the on-line forum for entertainment. However, could you use a Frequently Asked Questions list when you issue the on-line forum announcement to cut down on the same old questions being asked?

A. We do that to a degree already but will try to emphasize the FAQs.

S. I am supportive of the fare increase to keep the same level of service.

Q. Regarding Crash Energy Management Technology in the California accident, what does that do and does VRE have this?

A. It deflects the energy around the passenger compartment so passengers are not injured in a severe crash. VRE has this technology on its train cars.

Q. How much is the cost for PTC capital costs?
Attachment 8A.3 Summary Comments from Public Hearings

A. $10.8 million has been invested by VRE thus far.

S. I have rode VRE a long time, even back when Amtrak ran the service. I’d like to mention the crews are very good and informative. They do a real nice job.

March 3, 2015 PRTC 7:00 p.m.

Four attendees (two riders and two citizens running for elected office)

Q. Why does VRE subsidize the Step-Up ticket by $5?

A. We do not have the capacity to add train cars due to limited parking availability for the trains. This allows us to shift demand to Amtrak trains and increase capacity of the system.

Q. Why is there a new Fredericksburg Line train?

A. We are adding a new end of the line station in Spotsylvania this summer. This will cause incremental ridership increases from Spotsylvania, Caroline and King George counties so we need to provide additional capacity.

Q. Will the new train operate in the same window as existing trains?

A. Yes.

Q. Have the Class I railroads been cooperative in scheduling of the trains?

A. Yes.

S. An extra $100 per year is a lot for me. The commuter benefit helps but a four percent increase in fares is substantial to me. I don’t get a four percent increase in my cost of living.

S. VRE is a fine service. I would say perhaps you should not improve it any more. I can’t even get a Free Ride Certificate any more since you are on-time so much.

Q. Will the increase help you speed up service or help you break even?

A. Break even. The state proposed to provide us $10.3 million in FY15 and it turned out that the amount dropped to $9.1 million. For FY16, the State instructed us to reduce it by 10% to $8.1 million.

S. Mark Dudenhefer of Stafford County objected to the fare increase. He stated many folks are not subsidized and this is a hard hit to many people. Non-government employees have taken pay cuts to keep their jobs. He is upset over the reduction in state assistance to VRE while the state would provide $800 million for trolley service in Arlington.

Q. Are your fuel costs down?
A. Yes but we buy fuel and lock-in prices in advance which may not have helped us as much during the recent cost decrease.

Q. Are you programming increases over the next few years?

A. Yes. We plan for a fare increase every two years and a subsidy increase next year.

S. You should not plan automatic increases when the economy is rocky.

Q. Have you looked at peer commuter rail agencies and how they get dedicated funding for their operations?

A. Yes. We are continuing to examine potential operational funding sources for VRE. We did received dedicated funding from the state for track access fees at $16 million per year but without escalators.

S. Rod Hall- I am opposed to the fare increase as it is a burden to passengers. VRE needs a dedicated funding source otherwise we’ll be back here in two years.

March 12, 2015 Fredericksburg City Hall 7:00 p.m.

Seven attendees (3 riders, two reporters, Councilman Matt Kelley, and one Fredericksburg staff member)

Q. I understand the circumstances that require a fare increase. I am here more as a rider advocate for implementing Wi-Fi on the trains. Can you work with cell phone companies to cover the dead spots in coverage around Rippon and Leland? We need reliable coverage even for cell service.

A. We don’t want to add Wi-Fi service that may not help riders. When Positive Train Control (PTC) is implemented on the trains, we may have an opportunity to add better cell service as Wi-Fi is likely to be mediocre at best. We do not own adjacent property to construct new cell towers.

Q. Are you working on increasing the commuter benefit back to $245 per month? When it dropped back to $130 per month it cost me about $1,000 more per year. Please make parking and transit benefits equal again.

A. There is a bill in Congress to establish parity between parking and transit benefits at $235 per month. This would create a positive budget to the Treasury over ten years. We are not sure when the bill will be heard. It may become part of a tax extenders package. VRE would also like to make the parity permanent so changes in the tax code do not vacillate from year to year. This is our number one priority in Congress and members of the Northern Virginia Congressional Delegation are all supportive of this issue.

Q. Could you include an article about PTC in the Ride magazine?

A. Yes. We will.
Q. I read about energy absorbing train cars that California has in place during a recent accident there. Does VRE have energy absorbing cars?

A. VRE cars adhere to all crash worthiness standards established by the Federal Railroad Administration.

Q. You have had a $3 million decrease in revenues and the fare increase would bring in $1.1 million. Are you operating in the black?

A. Yes. We have decreased costs in other areas to make up the difference in reduced revenues.

S. VRE costs me about $60 more per month than riding in a vanpool. It would be nice if there were additional incentives to ride.

A. We have system constraints but we are always looking to improve service. An example is the Amtrak Step-Up tickets. We added two Amtrak trains that accept the Step-up tickets to give you more choices on when to ride.

Q. Please work with Metro to better coordinate train arrival and bus departure schedules from L’Enfant station. I take the Fredericksburg Express train first thing in the morning and I have to run to meet the bus and I often miss it.

A. We do have a Transit Link Card that allows riders to use Metro and VRE. We also open the Metro option when we have significant delays. When we add the new Fredericksburg Line train, we will update schedules and work with transit providers to better coordinate arrival and departure times.

S. I am concerned about the Commuter Benefit tax inequity. If a train is late, I often have to use leave so that’s why I don’t ride VRE as much as I used to.

Q. What is the track storage situation in D.C.? Will you have to turn back more trains in the future?

A. We are adding switches and signals and way-side power at a new storage track that is being constructed near L’Enfant station. It will allow a ten car train to be parked there during the mid-day. We hope to have it finished this summer. We do have some additional temporary storage with Amtrak north of Union Station but our planning staff is looking to find additional storage in the area.

Q. Is the land acquisition at Spotsylvania Station resolved?

A. Yes.

Q. Do you have a projected schedule for the new train?

A. No. We are working with Amtrak and CSXT on the schedule.
My name is Dave Salmon

I ride your trains occasionally between Crystal City and Union Station. The Metrorail one-way rush hour fare from Crystal City to Union Station is $3.65. Your fare for the same trip is $6.45 and now you want more.

I have owned a condominium in Crystal City since 1988. Back through the early 90's Crystal City was a pretty quiet place to live. The airline industry was phasing out older, noisier jet aircraft and replacing them with new generation, quieter planes. In my opinion, the airlines and the aerospace industry deserve high marks. Then you came along with your 105 decibel air horns.

I am familiar with the requirements imposed by Title 49 USC Section 220 and the regulations in Title 49 of the Code of Federal Regulations which deal primarily with grade crossings. I am aware of the very serious issue of grade crossing accidents - such as the one yesterday in California, but there are no grade crossings in Crystal City. I am aware that CSX, in its own best interest, has adopted its own internal operating policies for Crystal City and that those policies were recently modified.

However, in 20 years, you made no significant infrastructure or safety improvements to the Crystal City station and you have taken no steps to mitigate noise. CSX and Amtrak locomotives, which often do not even use the one track contiguous to the station, blow their horns when the platform is completely empty. I have seen this repeatedly. The 3 of you continue to rely on Civil War era technology - just come down on the horn - which is obviously cheap compared to the costs of re-aligning tracks or installing high-tech system. Paul Revere had better communication and warning systems than you do.

Until you take steps to improve the Crystal City station and mitigate air horn noise, I am opposed to your fare increases.

David D. Salmon
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