



VIRGINIA RAILWAY EXPRESS
OPERATIONS BOARD

Agenda Item 9-C
Action Item

To: Chair Franklin and the VRE Operations Board

From: Rich Dalton

Date: July 15, 2022

**Re: Authorization to Offer Fare Free Travel to All Riders in
September 2022 and Fare Free Travel in October 2022
Between Zones 1, 2 and 3**

Recommendation:

The VRE Operations Board is asked to authorize the Chief Executive Officer to offer fare free travel for all VRE riders in September 2022 and fare free travel between zones 1, 2 and 3 in October 2022.

Summary:

The fare free travel initiatives are intended to serve several purposes. They will show appreciation for and say thank you to the core group of VRE riders who stayed with the service throughout the pandemic; promote VRE service and attract new riders; and show support to the region's transportation network during the scheduled upcoming Metrorail service disruptions.

Background:

In June 2022, VRE staff provided an information item to the VRE Operations Board outlining the rationale for the fare free initiatives. In summary, September is traditionally a busy month for travel as commuters and schools return from summer vacation. This year, many federal agencies and other employers are expected to transition back to in-office work and away from the primarily remote work scenarios implemented during the pandemic. While teleworking is expected to remain as a component of the weekly work routine, the transition to more in-person work will cause workers to evaluate different options for their commute. The fare free offering will



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promote VRE as an option and help build ridership beyond the promotional period by allowing workers to experience the safety, reliability and convenience of VRE service. For those riders who have stayed with VRE throughout the pandemic, the fare free month is a great way to say thank you for the continued patronage.

On September 10th, WMATA will begin a series of shutdowns starting with all stations on the Blue and Yellow lines south of Reagan National Airport. VRE will serve as a major contributor to the regional mitigation efforts during this shutdown and the free fare offering will help maximize VRE's impact by encouraging Metro riders to try the VRE service during the first half of the six-week shutdown.

The shutdown of the Blue and Yellow lines will continue at least three weeks into October. Staff proposes continuing a fare free offering for those zones most directly affected by the shutdown. Zone 3 (Franconia-Springfield and Backlick Road) and Zone 2 (Alexandria and Crystal City) are likely to see the most potential impact from Metro riders looking for alternative transportation options. Providing free fares for riders between Zones 1 (Union Station and L'Enfant), 2 and 3 will continue VRE's role in the region's effort to mitigate the impact of the shutdown, and could help VRE develop new ridership in a previously underutilized segment of our service area.

Fiscal Impact:

As described in last month's information item, the expected cost of Free Fare September – in terms of foregone fare revenue, and before any impact of the Metrorail shutdown – is in the range of \$1.2 million to \$2.3 million. VRE's existing federal pandemic relief funds will provide a backstop to replace this foregone revenue.

The expected impact to VRE of free fares in September and October for travel between zones 1, 2 and 3 specifically is more modest. Current ridership to/from/between zones 1, 2 and 3 is relatively small at only 400 trips per day, with most of that ridership occurring at the Backlick Road station. Of course, if a significant share of passengers impacted by the Metrorail shutdown shift over to VRE, that figure could increase substantially. However, VRE expects to apply to the Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT) for special grant funds that are being made available to the region specifically for mitigation of the Metrorail shutdown. These funds, which are available at an 80 percent state share, would reimburse VRE for the foregone revenue associated with offering free fares for travel between zones 1, 2 and 3.

**Virginia Railway Express
Operations Board Resolution**

9C-07-2022

**Authorization to Offer Fare Free Travel to All Riders in September 2022
and Fare Free Travel in October 2022 Between Zones 1, 2 and 3**

WHEREAS, VRE wishes to thank the riders who have continued to utilize the service throughout the pandemic; and,

WHEREAS, VRE ridership is down from pre-pandemic levels and increasing ridership is a priority; and,

WHEREAS, the region's transportation network will experience a major disruption beginning September 10, 2022, during which VRE can help mitigate the impact of this disruption on commuters;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED THAT, the VRE Operations Board does hereby authorize the Chief Executive Officer to offer fare free travel for all VRE riders in September 2022 and fare free travel between zones 1, 2 and 3 in October 2022.

Approved this 15th day of July 2022

Margaret Franklin
Chair

Sarah Bagley
Secretary