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FROM THE CEO

DOUG ALLEN
Chief Executive Officer

Virginia Railway Express

Spring has finally arrived in northern Virginia after a cold winter that, I’m sure you’ll agree, lasted much too long. Spring is a great time at VRE because it beckons our annual “Meet the Management” events at our five busiest destination stations. I really enjoy the Meet the Management events because it gives me the opportunity to personally meet you, our customers, and listen to your concerns or suggestions about VRE services. It also gives me the chance to tell you about the plans we have to make VRE even better and highlight recent accomplishments we have made to improve your commute. So, if you get a chance, please introduce yourself to me or other VRE staff members at our Meet the Management events. You can find the locations and times of the events on page 4 of this month's RIDE Magazine. I look forward to seeing you soon.

DOUG ALLEN
Chief Executive Officer
Virginia Railway Express
SYSTEM PLAN 2040 ALIGNS VRE WITH REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION PRIORITIES

The recently adopted System Plan 2040 aligns the Virginia Railway Express with two key elements of the Regional Transportation Priorities Plan approved by the National Capital Region Transportation Planning Board (TPB) in January 2014. An overarching purpose of the Priorities Plan is to support efforts to incorporate projects and programs that support regional priorities into future updates of the region’s Constrained Long-Range Transportation Plan (or CLRP). The Priorities Plan serves as a policy guide to assist local, state, and regional leaders in “thinking regionally and acting locally”—that is, in considering regional needs when identifying transportation improvements to advance to implementation.

The Priorities Plan identifies the proper maintenance of the region’s existing transportation system as its top priority, of which commuter rail is an important part. The plan says that keeping existing transit, roads, and bridges safe and in good working order is essential before the region can move on to other improvements. The Priorities Plan also calls for expanding capacity on the existing transit systems, including capacity on the region’s railroads, as a way to take greater advantage of infrastructure that’s already in place.

System Plan 2040 continues VRE’s ongoing focus on maintaining equipment and facilities in a state of good repair and recommends capital investments and service improvements to expand VRE capacity and advance VRE’s role as part of the multimodal regional mobility network.

The System Plan has been submitted to the TPB for inclusion in the 2014 update to the CLRP. The CLRP identifies all the regionally significant road, bridge, transit, high-occupancy vehicle (HOV), bicycle and pedestrian projects that the region’s transportation agencies expect to be able to afford to build or implement by 2040. System Plan 2040 and the complementary MARC Growth and Investment Plan Update join nine other major projects within the National Capital Region proposed for inclusion in the 2014 CLRP update. The projects are due to be approved by the TPB at its meeting on April 16th for inclusion in the federally required air quality conformity assessment, which is required before the TPB considers the entire CLRP, including the new projects, for final approval in October 2014.

The TPB is the federally designated Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for the Washington, DC region, and plays an important role as the regional forum for transportation planning. The TPB prepares plans and programs that the federal government must approve in order for federal-aid transportation funds to flow to the Washington region.

Members of the TPB include representatives of local governments; state transportation agencies; the Maryland and Virginia General Assemblies; the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority; and non-voting members from the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority and federal agencies.

The TPB’s planning area covers the District of Columbia and surrounding jurisdictions. In Maryland these jurisdictions include Charles, Frederick, Montgomery, and Prince George’s Counties, plus the Cities of Bowie, College Park, Frederick, Gaithersburg, Greenbelt, Rockville, and Takoma Park. In Virginia, the planning area includes Arlington, Fairfax, Loudoun and Prince William Counties plus the Cities of Alexandria, Fairfax, Falls Church, Manassas and Manassas Park.
Growing up in Northern Virginia, Alexandria resident Jennifer Mitchell got a first-hand look at how transportation can change lives.

As the Dulles Toll Road was built in the 1980’s, Mitchell said she watched the once distant suburbs of Washington D.C. become urban communities offering new jobs, housing opportunities and attractions.

Now, as the new Director of the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation, Mitchell works daily to find ways to improve and expand public transit options that will support Virginia’s rapid growth and allow the Commonwealth to continue to thrive.

“The McAuliffe administration is really about economic development and creating new jobs and I think transportation is critical to that,” Mitchell said. “We are looking for ways to support transportation projects that help support job growth.”

Mitchell, who has spent more than 20 years in the transportation field, became director of DRPT in January. Prior to joining the state organization, Mitchell was a principal consultant with Parsons Brinckerhoff where she developed funding and implementation plans for large transit projects in Baltimore, California and Honolulu.

At DRPT, Mitchell and her staff strive to enhance public transit options across Virginia and work very closely with numerous agencies including the Virginia Railway Express. Since VRE’s inception, DRPT has supported the commuter-rail service, helping to fund rail cars, platform upgrades, infrastructure improvements and improvements to the capacity of the rail line itself.

“We have enjoyed a long history with VRE and have been a major funding partner,” Mitchell said. “We recognize they get over 20,000 riders a day and we want to continue to maintain that partnership. We see it as a really important alternative to (getting) on the highway.”

One of the biggest issues VRE currently faces—and something that also impacts Metro—is being constrained by core capacity. There are choke points as the public transit lines merge into the city and storage capacity has maxed out, making it hard to add more rail cars or additional VRE trains, Mitchell said.

Mitchell said she would like to see VRE extend to Gainesville and Haymarket—something commuter-rail officials have talked about for years—and knows the extension into Spotsylvania, which is under way, will be a great addition for VRE. Over the years Mitchell said she would also like to see more mid-day service and trains that cater to the reverse commuter.

Mitchell said she has enjoyed her first few months on the job, delving into everything from freight and passenger rail issues in Virginia to bus systems and other public transit organizations. Mitchell has also remained involved in several transportation organizations including the American Public Transportation Association, which gives scholarships to students entering careers in public transportation, and she is secretary of the Women’s Transportation Seminar International’s board of directors.

“We have enjoyed a long history with VRE and have been a major funding partner. We recognize they get over 20,000 riders a day and we want to continue to maintain that partnership.”

By Jennifer Buske

MEET JENNIFER MITCHELL

JENNIFER MITCHELL
VRE OPERATIONS BOARD MEMBER & DIRECTOR, DEPARTMENT OF RAIL AND PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION
In 1912, the people of Japan sent 3,020 cherry trees to the United States as a gift of friendship. First Lady Taft and the Viscountess Chinda, wife of the Japanese Ambassador, planted the first two cherry trees on the northern bank of the Tidal Basin. These two original trees are still standing today near the John Paul Jones statue at the south end of 17th Street. Workmen planted the remainder of the trees around the Tidal Basin and East Potomac Park. Approximately 3,750 cherry trees are on the Tidal Basin in Washington, DC. Most of the trees are Yoshino Cherry. Other species include Kwanzan Cherry, Akebono Cherry, Takesimensis Cherry, Usuzumi Cherry, Weeping Japanese Cherry, Sargent Cherry, Autumn Flowering Cherry, Fugenzo Cherry, Afterglow Cherry, Shirofugen Cherry and Okame Cherry.

Washington, DC’s famed cherry trees grow in three park locations: around the Tidal Basin in West Potomac Park, in East Potomac Park (Hains Point), and on the grounds of the Washington Monument.

The date when the Yoshino cherry blossoms reach their peak bloom varies from year to year, depending on the weather. Unseasonably warm and/or cool temperatures have resulted in the trees reaching peak bloom as early as March 15 (1990) and as late as April 18 (1958). The blooming period can last up to 14 days. The dates of the National Cherry Blossom Festival are set based on the average date of blooming, which is around April 4th. Each year, the chief horticulturist for the National Park Service forecasts the expected peak cherry blossom dates.

SIGHTS TO SEE

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MEET NATHAN FOOSE

Nathan Foose, or Nate as he likes to be known, came to the Virginia Railway Express in 2010 by way of the U.S. Air Force. After serving four years of active duty, which included a six-month deployment in Iraq as a technical sergeant, Foose joined the active reserve and began looking for a civilian job during the tough 2009 economy. He began working for Norfolk Southern and after a year he began to miss the personal nature of customer service and interacting with people.

Intrigued by the opportunity to combine customer service with the railroad, Nate began working on the VRE as an assistant conductor in 2010. He quickly established a good rapport with passengers. The work-pace is stressful and it’s nice to offer individuals a way to commute that allows them to unwind, relax and get home safely.” One story stands in particular for Foose. Shortly after the birth of his daughter, a regular passenger on the Manassas line got to the Alexandria station earlier than usual and had knitted his newborn daughter a bib! “That’s the kind of passengers we have—who care about the people who get them safely to where they need to be.”

Foose’s training in the Air Force has proven to be excellent preparation for his service on the VRE. It instilled in him an understanding of the importance of rules and why they must be followed, and has helped him remain calm, cool and collected under pressure. Foose was recently selected to participate in Keolis North America’s Assistant Conductor Engineer Program (ACE). The six-month intensive program, unique to Keolis, certifies conductors to become engineers. As a conductor you don’t always get to see and appreciate what the engineer does. It’s a very demanding job that requires focus and knowledge.”

Foose is set to graduate in a few weeks and will be able to work as an engineer and conductor while continuing to do what he loves.

“The work-pace is stressful and it’s nice to offer individuals a way to commute that allows them to unwind, relax and get home safely.”
Looking for an alternative to driving to the train station? Are you tired of traffic congestion and paying high gas prices? Want to help the environment and get fit at the same time? Try bicycling to a VRE station on Bike to Work Day in Prince William County on Friday, May 16, 2014.

Did you know that 50% of VRE riders live within five miles of the VRE station that they use to get to work? Bike to the station and then ride on VRE to your final destination. Check out www.biketoworkmetrodc.org to register.

There will be eight pit stops located in Prince William County including three VRE stations: the Manassas VRE station, the Woodbridge station, and the Rippon station. Visit a pit stop on Bike to Work Day and there will be happy smiling volunteers to greet you early in the morning. They will hand out Bike to Work Day t-shirts for bicyclists who registered for the pit stop and offer food and refreshments. Several of the pit stops will have bicycle mechanics on hand from local bicycle shops to conduct safety tune-ups. All bicyclists registering for the pit stops will be entered in a random drawing for assorted bicycle related accessories. Bicyclists registering for the pit stops located at the Manassas VRE, Woodbridge VRE and the Rippon Landing VRE are eligible to receive free VRE trip passes (limited number, so show up early).

Interested in learning more about bike safety? Check out the Prince William Trails and Streams website, pwtsc.org, for information on upcoming Safe Bicycle Commuting classes.

VRE BIKE POLICY

VRE’s Bike Policy can be found online at http://www.vre.org/service/bike_policy.html. The policy allows passengers to carry on folding bicycles which can be stored over or under the passenger seat on all cars and all trains.

Full size bicycles are allowed on the cab car located at the northernmost car’s southern section, on each of the last three northbound and southbound trains on each line, as well as the mid-day and reverse-flow trains. These trains include:

**Fredericksburg Line:**
Northbound: 308, 310, 312
Southbound: 301, 309, 311, 313

**Manassas Line:**
Northbound: 328, 330, 332, 336, 338
Southbound: 321, 325, 333, 335, 337

No more than two full size bicycles are allowed on a train at a time. VRE currently provides capacity for 34 full size bicycles daily (24 peak hour and 10 off-peak).

Full size bicycles must be tethered to the bench seats using a bungee cord attached to the eyelet on the seat frame. The south end bench is distinguishable by having only four folding seats. Bicyclists will be responsible for securing their own bicycle.

The bench seating on the north end of the car is priority seating for passengers with disabilities. This area is located directly across from the restroom and cannot be used for bicycles. If the bench seating for full size bicycles is occupied by passengers, the bicycle rider may ask the passenger to vacate the seat or ask the conductor for assistance if the passenger is unwilling to move. The priority will be for the bicycles.

For the safety and convenience of our other riders, bicycles will be boarded and removed last after all other passengers have boarded or detrained. Passengers are not permitted to ride any bicycle on the platforms or trains. All bicycles must be clean and free of grease. VRE will not be responsible for the security of bicycles brought on board.

In addition to allowing bicycles on our trains, VRE also takes steps to accommodate those that wish to ride to our stations by installing bike racks at all VRE inbound loading stations.
Amtrak will celebrate its 7th annual National Train Day at Union Station in Washington, D.C. on Saturday, May 10, 2014 from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. This year, they are expanding their efforts by coordinating activities in 16 primary markets (17 markets with train displays) and 150 smaller markets around the country. By enlarging the scope of activity, the hope is to increase engagement with communities and strengthen attendees’ awareness of the value of intercity passenger, commuter and freight rail operations.

National Train Day 2014 promises to be full of activities that will delight visitors while demonstrating why trains matter to us all. Trains take us where we need and want to go. They bring us to school, to work, to visit a friend. They move valuable natural resources to power American industry and transport cargo from ports to destinations across the continent, including local store shelves. Trains are an indispensable part of our lives, for they connect us to each other and tell our story.

While many attendees will be familiar with passenger rail equipment, National Train Day presents them with a rare opportunity to see freight locomotives, commuter rail, and other private cars up close.

Freight and passenger railroads, integral to our nation’s highly-developed intermodal system, are the foundation for this hugely successful annual celebration that appeals to people of all ages and backgrounds.

We hope you’ll help America discover the railway by joining us on National Train Day in Washington, D.C. As in years past, we will have our best volunteers assisting with the public tours.

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3) Rosslyn Metro Station
   (Fort Myer Dr. at Wilson Blvd)
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