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## VRE kicks off major expansion plan with new Spotsylvania station



The VRE station at L'Enfant Plaza is seen in this file photo. (Gerald Martineau/The Washington Post)

By Luz Lazo April 18

**Virginia Railway Express is opening a new Northern Virginia station this summer, marking the first major service expansion in the system's 23-year history and a key piece of VRE's long-term plans to meet the region's growing transit needs.**

**The new terminal in Spotsylvania County will extend service south of Fredericksburg, potentially drawing several hundred new riders from a part of Northern Virginia geared up for growth and development.**

**The \$3.4 million station is the first of several major projects VRE is pursuing as part of its goal to double ridership by 2040. Next month, it will launch a mobile app to give riders the option of purchasing and showing tickets via**

smartphones, and it will add a train to the Fredericksburg Line this summer. A station at the Potomac Shores mixed-use community, south of Woodbridge, is in the design phase, and a study is underway for the extension of the Manassas Line to Gainesville and Haymarket in Prince William County.

“The future growth in Northern Virginia demands that we do something about transportation, and I don’t think building or widening roads is the answer,” said Spotsylvania Board of Supervisors member Gary F. Skinner (I-Lee Hill), who serves as vice chairman of the VRE Operations Board. “We can reduce traffic congestion on major highways by adding more ways for people to commute north.”

Beyond expanding the service area, VRE envisions more frequent service and the use of longer trains to ease crowding. The agency plans to expand platforms at five Fredericksburg Line stations to accommodate those trains. And it is collaborating with CSX and the state’s rail agency in the construction of a third track between L’Enfant Plaza in the District and Spotsylvania that will ensure better traffic flow in the busy rail system VRE shares with Amtrak and freight trains. That undertaking is half completed.



Source: VRE DENISE LU/THE WASHINGTON POST

Demand for commuter train service has steadily grown over the past decade. As VRE has invested in new rail cars and expanding station platforms and parking facilities, its daily ridership has grown by about 30 percent. The increased demand coincides with significant population growth in the communities it serves, including Fairfax, Prince William and Stafford counties and Fredericksburg.

The emergence of job centers such as Innovation Park in Manassas, which is anchored by George Mason University’s Prince William campus; defense-associated growth at Quantico and Fort Belvoir; and the surge of mixed-use development in the region’s outer suburbs is projected to boost the use of the commuter rail, said Kanti Srikanth, director of transportation planning at the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments.

As the region continues to grow, investment in commuter rail is an integral part of the long-range plan to meet growing mobility demands, Srikanth said.

The Council of Governments projects that the region — including the VRE service area — will have a nearly 26 percent increase in population and 36 percent increase in jobs over the next 25 years.

“We will need more transit — all kinds of transit,” Srikanth said.

### **Bypassing the traffic**

Andrea Holmes, an auditor, says commuting on VRE between her Woodbridge home and Union Station in the District means she doesn't have to deal with the stress of bumper-to-bumper traffic on Interstate 95. It also saves money on gas, vehicle maintenance and the \$20 a day she'd otherwise pay for downtown parking.

“This is a lot more relaxing than being stuck in traffic,” Holmes said recently during her 45-minute ride home as she listened to soothing music and looked out at breathtaking views of the Potomac River.

VRE says that most of its trains run at 90 percent capacity. Agency officials say the plan is to introduce 10-car trains to increase capacity. The problem is that longer trains require more storage facilities, which VRE lacks.

Increasing storage is on VRE's list of priority capital projects for the next 25 years, totaling more than \$2.7 billion.

Expanding the Long Bridge over the Potomac is another priority. Turning it from two tracks into four is critical for VRE to be able to run more trains. A four-track bridge with bike and pedestrian facilities is under consideration, but funding for the \$1.1 billion project and for others has not been identified.

VRE is a partnership between the Northern Virginia Transportation Commission and the Potomac and Rappahannock Transportation Commission and, like other transit systems, it depends heavily on local, state and federal subsidies. About half of its operating costs are covered by fares.

The agency's proposed fiscal 2016 budget of \$136 million includes a 4 percent fare increase that officials say is necessary to keep up with rising costs. The budget includes money for nine new rail cars and some station and parking improvements.

Holmes, a VRE rider for the past decade, said that although she prefers riding the train to driving for her daily commute, on days when she takes a dance class in the District she is forced to drive because the last train leaves at 6:40 p.m. When she has to return home early, she has to make sure to be on the 12:55 p.m. train because there are no southbound trains earlier and the next one is not until 3:35 p.m.

Like other riders, Holmes would like to see more frequent trips, trains running later at night and on weekends, and more reverse commute options.

#### **'A big market out there'**

All of those are in VRE's 2040 plan , which projects adding reverse peak and express trains by 2030.

A more immediate plan is the expansion of the Manassas Line to Gainesville and Haymarket, which could be completed within seven years. Already underway is a 22-month study of the proposed addition of three stations in areas of western Prince William that have seen extensive growth in housing and commercial development.

"We already have the track that goes out this way, and that's why it is a logical extension," said Brian Henshaw, Haymarket's town manager.

The town of nearly 2,000 residents views the proposed extension as an opportunity to draw commerce and visitors.

"We are very proud of our small town, and we like having a small-town feel. But at the same time, it is a realistic issue, it will give people a chance to actually come here, too," Henshaw said.

At Potomac Shores, 30 miles south of Washington on I-95, the developer, SunCal, is building a \$20 million VRE station in the middle of a town center for a planned community of nearly 4,000 residential units and 3.7 million square feet of commercial space. The station is slated to open in 2017.

Access to public transit at the mammoth project is touted as one of the top amenities of the 1,920-acre waterfront community, said Frank Cappello, president of the company's eastern region.

“We know what the home buyers are looking for. We are watching demographic shifts and know where people want to live, and people generally want to spend less time in their cars — or at least have the option to,” Cappello said.