



Focus Group Sessions
and
In-Depth Interviews

ATTITUDINAL SURVEYS AND MARKET RESEARCH
FOR THE
VIRGINIA RAILWAY EXPRESS

PART III:
FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS
AND
IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Prepared for:

Potomac and Rappahannock Transportation Commission,
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Disclaimer

The findings and conclusions in this report are those of John Gobis and not necessarily those of the Virginia Railway Express, Northern Virginia Transportation Commission, or Potomac and Rappahannock Transportation Commission.

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INTRODUCTION

Part of the market research study for the Virginia Railway Express (VRE) involved qualitative research activities including:

- Focus group sessions with residents of areas near the Virginia Railway Express (VRE) stations and commuters of the I-66 and I-95 corridors; and
- In-depth interviews with key decision makers in the VRE service area.

This report presents the findings of the freely initiated focus group sessions and the in-depth interviews conducted by John Gobis, subcontractor to JHK & Associates (JHK). This qualitative research allowed JHK to obtain a broad range of insight into public opinion about the VRE, its products and services. These focus group sessions explored perceptions of single-occupant vehicle users, van and carpoolers, express and Metrobus users, and Amtrak users in the VRE service area. The primary objectives of the focus group and in-depth interview sessions were the following:

- To assess general public awareness and acceptance of VRE;
- To identify major barriers to VRE usage, especially vis a vis single-occupancy auto, car and van pooling and express bus commuting;
- To gauge public reaction towards VRE's proposed fare structure and payment methods;
- To segment market groups representing the best potential for ridership and to define them by demographic characteristics;
- To evaluate VRE's proposed schedules with preferred commute times;
- To gain perceptions of proposed VRE station design and amenities; and
- To identify promotional and joint development opportunities.

In addition to these primary objectives, the focus groups and in-depth interviews enabled JHK to explore topics in more detail than is feasible on the telephone.

In-depth interviews were conducted with decision makers in the VRE service area to gauge perceptions of the VRE among those who represented business, civic and social interests. Major service areas developers, major employers, as well as trade association, economic development and tourism officials were interviewed to determine the potential economic impact of the VRE project and possible linkage to business which would boost

ridership. Representatives of homeowners' associations were also interviewed to determine residential sensitivities to the VRE project.

Finally, in-depth interviews were conducted with two reporters from daily newspapers in the VRE service area to evaluate perceived public attitudes towards the project resulting from media coverage.

METHODOLOGY

Males and females between 18 and 65 years of age were participants in the focus group sessions. They represented a racial mix consistent with that projected in U.S. Census data for the VRE service area. The geographical mix was oriented to "catchment areas" around five key VRE stations: Burke Center, Leeland, Manassas Airport, Rolling Road, and Woodbridge.

The focus groups included single-occupant vehicle commuters along both the I-66 and I-95 corridors, single-occupant vehicle users who commute within the VRE service area but do not use either interstate highway, car poolers and vanpoolers using both roads, and express bus users. Focus group participants were randomly recruited using telephone prefix lists from the telephone survey. Specific commuters were recruited with the assistance of the various VRE-member municipal technical staffs. Each participant was paid a stipend which is a common practice for focus group sessions.

Focus group sessions were conducted in public facilities selected and scheduled by the Potomac and Rappahannock Transportation Commission. Sessions were held in Fredericksburg, Woodbridge and Manassas during the week of January 14th in the evenings. Sessions lasted from one to two hours in length and were audio taped.

In addition separate informal interviews were conducted with Amtrak commuters at the Manassas Station and Metrobus commuters at the Burke Center Park and Ride Lot.

The in-depth interviews were conducted with VRE service area decision makers. These decision makers included major service area employers, major developers, homeowner association directors, economic development and tourism directors of municipalities, public transit advocates and critics, merchant association executives and newspaper writers who cover the VRE as well as the Northern Virginia Transportation Commission and Potomac and Rappahannock Transportation Commission.

The names of those interviewed came primarily from members of the VRE Commuter Rail Task Force, comprised of the technical staffs of VRE-member municipalities. Additional interviews were generated by JHK researchers as a result of their discussions with other decision makers.

Interviews were primarily conducted at the interviewees' places of business, although some were conducted by telephone. Interviews ranged from 20 minutes in length to more than one hour.

In-depth contact interviews were conducted with the following individuals:

Leeland Road/Fredericksburg

Hunter Greenlaw, President, Greenlaw Properties
Jo Love Willis, Director of Tourism, City of Fredericksburg
Bill Beck, President, Downtown Merchants Association
Jim Toller, Reporter, Fredericksburg Star

Manassas/Manassas Park

Garron Stutzman, President, So-Deep Incorporated
Sam Waddle, Trade Association Executive, Independent Airport Operators
James Yowell, Van Pool Operator
Jerri Columbari, Public Affairs, IBM
Lawrence Doll, President, Doll Development Corporation

Burke Center/Rolling Road

Pat Moore, President, Burke Conservancy
Ed Rizzi, Vice President, Hazel Peterson Company
Kurt Doehnert, President, Van Pooling Group
Mrs. Rob Porter, Homeowners Association Rolling Road

Woodbridge/Dawson's Beach

John Gessaman, Director, Prince William County, Office of Economic Development
Brooke Masters, Reporter, Washington Post
Steve Dixon, Chairman, Mass Transit Committee of Prince William County

Copies of the focus group and in-depth interview topical outlines are included in Appendices III-A and III-B of this report.

FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS

SUMMARY OF FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Based on comments received during the sessions, there was unanimous agreement among focus group participants that traffic congestion in Northern Virginia will require many transportation solutions. There was less than unanimous consent as to whether VRE would be an effective solution although very few thought that VRE would not succeed.

Support for VRE and the strongest potential ridership are in those areas farther from the Washington metropolitan area, especially Manassas and Fredericksburg. While ridership in Prince William and Fairfax Counties will be substantial, according to participants, single-occupant vehicle commuters in these areas are sophisticated in their commute patterns as well as their knowledge of the cost of commuting and will be difficult to convert to VRE use.

Focus group participants believed VRE's primary market will be commuters who travel alone. Vanpoolers and carpoolers who use both the I-66 and I-95 corridors have almost "door to door" transit service at rates (\$75 to \$120 per month) that make their likelihood to use VRE service very low.

The transfer at the end of the VRE trip either at King Street, Crystal City, L'Enfant Plaza or Union Station is a concern of potential users as well. If the commuter is within walking distance of his final destination then the VRE service would surely be preferred over solo commuting, express bus or car/vanpooling. However, mode-transfers to Metrorail or Metrobuses are perceived as inconvenient and time-consuming.

The appeal of VRE is strong, in the area of what is called "lifestyle" considerations. Commuters using both corridors have a strong belief that commuting on I-66 or I-95 requires them to sacrifice time with their families in order to make the commute. Focus group participants described having to leave their homes as early as 5:10 AM in order to arrive in the Metropolitan Washington area for work by 8:00 AM, using existing commuter bus and rail services. Participants perceived that VRE trains could reduce commute time through faster, uninterrupted travel.

In regard to VRE meeting the work schedules of focus group participants, the proposed VRE schedules met most participants' work schedules and would allow them to arrive to work in a shorter period of time than they now experience. This perception gave rise to general belief that the VRE could improve the quality of life in the service

area by reducing the amount of time spent in traffic and allowing commuters to spend more time at home.

The proposed VRE fare structure was thought to be high by the majority of focus group participants, but not impractical. Many commuters are very conscious of their commuting cost. An issue raised by many commuters regarded the need to transfer or change modes to reach their final destination. If Metrorail or Metrobus fares were charged in addition to the VRE fare, the fare was considered too high. The concept of paying for fares via credit card was not well received. Participants said primary payment will come from cash, check and debit card.

Participants also expressed concerns regarding station security and design. Many people would pay a parking fee so that VRE could provide security for their autos and themselves. In regard to station design and amenities, most participants questioned whether the present design offered enough cover. Many suggested a windscreen bench on platforms to block wind, rain and snow. Participants also thought that telephones and newspaper racks were essential amenities. Only one or two cited the need for toilets at the station; none thought toilets were necessary on board trains.

Participants generally thought that VRE stations would add to congestion in their localities in that most users would drive to the station. Most participants thought that the stations could provide a catalyst for positive development. Some, although a minority, thought the stations were the object of land speculation right now and that would lead to more unnecessary development.

Finally, all participants expressed concern about VRE being able to deliver on its promises and especially on its timetable. One focus group participant brought Virginia Department of Transportation public information booklets on I-95 projects dating back from 1978, saying that few if any of the projects had actually been concluded. Despite this legacy, almost all participants, even those who were anti-rail, thought that VRE could be a success but time was of the essence.

These opinions represent the major perceptions and concerns of focus group participants. A more detailed discussion of specific issues is presented in the following sections.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE VIRGINIA RAILWAY EXPRESS ROLE AND IMAGE IN ITS SERVICE AREA

All focus group participants believe that traffic congestion is the most significant problem facing Northern Virginia. And mostly all focus group participants believe that

VRE is part of the solution, although their belief to what degree it would help solve the traffic problem varied. The view was held that VRE, and projects like extending HOV lanes, would help improve commuting.

The extent to which traffic congestion negatively impacts life in the VRE service area cannot be minimized. Focus group participants told of averaging 35 miles per hour on trips up I-95 from Fredericksburg to the District of Columbia, a trip from Woodbridge to D.C. averaged 20 minutes in 1985 today averages 45 minutes, and trips from Manassas to D.C. for an 8:00 AM start of work starting as early as 5:10 AM using existing transit services.

Focus group participants described traffic this way:

"Traffic owns you in Northern Virginia."

"It changes your life. . . . you get up earlier and earlier each year."

"Development now exceeds our ability to build roads."

Despite wide recognition of the problem, there exists many questions in the minds of Northern Virginians who participated in the groups as to whether VRE or any of the other promised transportation solutions would ever be completed. One Woodbridge/Dawson's Beach focus group participant brought to the session various Virginia Department of Transportation public information brochures dating back to 1978 which detailed transportation projects promised to Northern Virginia but which, the participant claimed, were never completed. A small number of participants also urged VRE to come forth with verifiable data to financially justify the project.

While there exists a disillusionment with the speed of transportation solutions most participants thought that VRE would succeed but may not be delivered on time and at the cost initially projected.

"Accountability is important . . . this can't be another B1 bomber with cost overruns."

"The government needs to encourage diverse solutions and this train is one, but we need to look at the cost effectiveness of each solution."

In regard to knowledge of the VRE, the Northern Virginia Transportation Commission and the Potomac and Rappahannock Transportation Commission, many participants knew who the VRE was but few knew the roles of the other two agencies. While there is a lingering doubt that VRE would succeed, the majority of focus group

participants should be classified as supporters of the project -- not necessarily riders but supporters. VRE still has before it a sizeable marketing job to convert these supporters to riders.

POTENTIAL TO RIDE THE SERVICE

The factor most crucial to the decision to ride VRE is convenience in the view of the focus group participants. Convenience as defined by the participants is:

- Travel time from 60 to 70 minutes from Fredericksburg to D.C., 45 to 60 minutes from Manassas and, obviously, shorter trip times from areas closer to the Metropolitan Washington area.
- No need to change modes at the terminus of the trip in D.C., unless it is a very convenient Metrorail transfer.
- Hassle-free and ample parking at all VRE stations.

Of these convenience elements, participants most often referred to "lifestyle" advantages of train travel:

"If I could lay back, go to sleep or read a paper and just relax . . . I would use the train."

"If the train can do the trip faster than a bus or van, I'd try it . . . that should be in their ads -- have the train going by the buses and cars stopped in traffic."

WORK AND TRAIN SCHEDULES

Participants raised issues about the frequency of service. Some thought that the current limit of four AM and PM trains was inadequate and did not provide the flexibility to make VRE truly a competitive product to bus and car pools. While the proposed VRE schedule did adequately serve the most frequent work start time of focus group participants (6:30 to 8:00 AM), many participants worked flexible schedules which allowed them to leave work earlier than a traditional 5:00 PM departure and many worked later into the evening. Some consistently worked as late as 8:00 PM.

VRE will have some converts from existing express buses because those commuters who participated in the groups perceived that the train would be faster and would not confront stopped traffic on I-66 or I-95. However, some express bus users

would not convert despite travel time advantage because of door-to-door service they now receive via express bus.

"The only way I'd convert if the trains fare to Metrorail was free."

In the sessions, these commuters were most aware of the convenience of their current mode against VRE's proposed routing and scheduling. Carpoolers and vanpoolers will be tough converts because of the perceived inconvenience of no easy transfer. Those participants who worked within five to six blocks of King Street, L'Enfant Plaza, Crystal City or Union Station would probably walk to their offices and use VRE. Carpoolers and vanpoolers in the groups offered the most resistance to VRE use:

"My vanpool offers me the luxury of an individual captain's chair and door-to-door service . . . the rail could never match that."

Fares and price are a factor which will be discussed in a succeeding section, but price was not the most referred to determinant of ridership. Convenience clearly is the key to capturing ridership for VRE.

The focus group participants who commuted along either corridor were sophisticated commuters in that they are very aware of their alternatives:

"Good mass transit improves the quality of life but I still want what is cheapest for me and that's the vanpool."

This level of sophistication should ensure VRE healthy ridership if the system can be as convenient as the focus group participants want the system to be. One trade-off from the session would appear to be more frequent service for a higher fare:

"The schedule I saw on the bus is not nearly enough (service) for the price."

Based upon the focus group participants' perceptions of VRE, the marketing program for VRE should promote the service as convenient, direct, fast and frequent.

REACTION TO PROPOSED FARES AND PRICE SENSITIVITY

Focus group participants were asked to place a value on a one-way VRE trip. Answers ranged from \$8.00 to as low as \$2.50, near or within the proposed VRE rate

structure. Most participants who rode express buses paid between \$120 and \$180 per month. Van and carpoolers typically pay between \$75 and \$85 per month, but some vanpoolers reported costs as high as \$110 per month from Fredericksburg and \$120 per month from Manassas.

As previously mentioned, commuter focus group participants were quite sophisticated in their commuting habits and in their knowledge of commuting costs.

"Amtrak charges \$300 per month. That's too steep."

"The train price has to be practical . . . will it allow free transfers to Metro?"

"The train would be about \$20 more than the bus but the bus leaves me at my door."

"If I can drive to work cheaper than the train, I'll continue to do it unless the train can prove it's faster."

In considering fares, participants thought the VRE should consider the cost of transferring to other modes at the end of the line in D.C. and the cost of parking at VRE lots (parking costs were thought to be justified if security was provided).

It must be noted that research typically indicates a resistance to any fare structure with the normal reaction to a proposed fare structure being that the fare structure is too high.

In regard to fare payment methods, most commuters who participated in the sessions, pay as they go. They pay for their buses or pools on a weekly basis although several paid monthly. One reason cited was flexible work schedules of some government agencies do not require employees to work normal five-day work weeks, so commuters pay only for what they use.

In regard to the ticket machines, most participants had used Metrorail ticket vending machines (TVM) at some time so the VRE TVM was not regarded as alien. The overwhelming majority of focus group participants would not use credit cards to buy their VRE fares. Most said they would purchase tickets daily or weekly because of flexible work schedules. Many cited high interest and transaction fee costs as reasons for not buying a VRE monthly pass using a credit card. More likely to be used for payment, according to participants, would be cash, debit cards and checks.

Focus group participants expressed concern about the continuing cost of operating VRE. Group participants thought the fares should not be so high as to make VRE unaffordable but that a balance must be achieved between the cost of service and its effectiveness (ridership).

ACCESS TO STATIONS AND STATION LOCATIONS

Most focus group participants who would use the VRE said they would drive their cars to the station although there was strong support in all sessions for some form of feeder bus service intra-county. Some participants thought they would walk to the stations, some would carpool. Some expressed reservations about access to the stations:

"The drive to the station will deter people from riding it."

"People will have to fight to get to the station at Woodbridge -- making the turn at the light will be impossible."

In regard to station locations, when participants viewed a VRE service map many thought there were too many stations. Those participants commuting today via bus, car or van pool were used to driving a considerable distance to a park and ride lot (some also drove out of their way to pick up commuters in order to gain access to the HOV lanes).

Many thought that VRE stations might bring additional traffic congestion especially at those stations closer to the Washington Metropolitan Area. Metrobus commuters at Burke Center thought the bus should be re-routed to provide more feeder service to the proposed rail station nearby.

In regard to station location, many focus group participants brought up security as a strong concern. Female participants expressed the strongest concern for personal safety:

"I'd pay for parking if they provided a security guard at the station."

Specific concerns were also expressed about the location of the station in Fredericksburg and to the lack of lighting at the Manassas Station. Some suggested that VRE should open stations well in advance of and after train service has ceased to provide security to those who would be dropped off or picked up by spouses.

ANTICIPATED STATION AMENITIES AND PARKING CONSIDERATIONS

Security, as previously mentioned, was a primary concern of participants in regard to VRE stations. Some suggested VRE charge a parking fee at each station as a way to provide for (pay) security, although most thought parking should be free at VRE

stations. A participant suggested that VRE allow the private sector to provide the parking concession at stations as a way to defray costs and to provide this perceived necessary security, who said, "Let the private sector do it and don't use public money to provide such amenities." The security issue was also addressed by present day express bus commuters who said that cars in park and ride lots had been vandalized and that there had been a "black market" developed by thieves who would steal license plate tags off of cars in these lots and sell them.

Focus group participants were shown schematic drawings of proposed VRE lots and were asked for comments on the designs. Most thought the proposed canopies did not provide enough coverage and that some form of windscreen should be put on the back of each platform to block the elements. A majority of participants wanted benches on platforms along with telephones and some limited vending such as newspapers and automated teller machines. Participants also wanted ticket sales at all stations. Some participants made unfavorable remarks about the proposed platform widths stating they looked too narrow to provide good circulation. Restrooms were thought to be unnecessary on board trains and better placed in stations by several participants' comments.

According to most focus group participants the preferred access to the station would be by car. The adequacy of parking was viewed by participants in number of spaces, access to those spaces (entry and egress to the lot), walking distance to the train and security. One participant viewing the station schematic offered this suggestion, "Eliminate that landscaping and put more parking in."

ANTICIPATED TRAIN AMENITIES

Focus group participants had a pre-disposed perception of train amenities, as described by one participant:

"You lay back, go to sleep and relax on a train."

Participants expected the same type of interior amenities as they would receive on an airline--reclining seats, luggage racks and lap tables. When shown a drawing of the proposed VRE coach interior participant comments ran from "spartan" to "comparable to the bus" to "too much luxury." This wide range of attitudes made the VRE scheme a neutral choice.

In regard to seating, most participants would prefer a high-back, reclining seat with armrests. Participants discussed accommodation for standees saying that the VRE drawing did not appear to accommodate standees although many thought ridership should be sufficient to warrant accommodation of standees.

Participants commented on the lack of individual reading lights in the interior car scheme, saying it looked as if the interior car lights would be on all the time, unlike buses or vans which have separate lighting for each seat.

Expanded luggage racks and garment bag closets were mentioned for business travelers. Again, as with other topics, the concept of cost came into consideration. When this issue was raised most participants opted for a comfortable yet practical amenities package on-board.

Toilets, as previously mentioned, were thought to be best placed in stations and not on-board trains.

INFORMATION SOURCES, KNOWLEDGE OF VRE SERVICE

Nearly all focus group participants had knowledge of VRE service. Only one focus group participant had not heard of VRE and did not know who was to operate this service.

While this knowledge level is favorable and displays general public interest in the project, it also artificially raises public expectations of VRE and creates a "thirst" for information. Some participants cited the need for VRE to provide more rationale for its budget and its ridership predictions.

"These commissions (VRE, PRTC, NVTC) owe the public valid statistical proof."

"The public is skeptical about these projects because they've been promised so much before."

The majority of focus group participants said they had first heard of VRE in local newspaper reports and that all their information had been gathered from these reports. Some expressed interest in hearing directly and frequently from the VRE in the future.

Focus group participants were asked to list the sources from which they receive information. This question was intended to elicit responses which could guide future VRE marketing/public information strategies. Local newspapers (Fredericksburg Star-Journal, Washington Post, Manassas Journal and the other Journal newspapers) were mentioned most frequently. Morning drive time radio was the second most

frequently named information source followed by cable television. Word-of-mouth information sources were not as strong according to participants, except those who participated in homeowners' associations.

CONCLUSIONS FROM FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS

At the moment there exists a high degree of expectations for the Virginia Railway Express, according to the focus groups. This high level of expectation is accompanied by a degree of skepticism from Northern Virginia residents who have evidently been promised transportation solutions previously but have not received them, according to participants. Surprisingly, it must also be noted that some car/vanpoolers, as well as express bus riders, are not advocates of VRE but consider it an adversary.

Given the unique consensus regarding traffic in the VRE service area, commuter rail service is given strong opportunity to succeed by those participating in the focus groups. One participant said, "VRE is just one of the diverse solutions we need." When all specific topical issues were reviewed and debated by the focus groups, one immediate course of action was recommended -- that VRE begin to open a dialogue with the public it is intended to serve. Communication would serve to improve ridership prospects as well as to respond to those who would criticize VRE's role as a transportation solution to Northern Virginia's congestion problems.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

SUMMARY OF IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW FINDINGS

The in-depth interviews yielded very favorable opinions about the potential positive impact on the VRE on its service area. These in-depth interviews also uncovered unique opportunities for linkage between the VRE and the private sector, among them:

- Potential for a 308-unit residential complex near to the Manassas Station.
- Willingness of major employers to shift work schedules to adhere to VRE schedules.
- A VRE station as the potential catalyst to economic development of an entire neighborhood.
- The VRE being a major competitive advantage for businesses to relocate to the municipalities within the VRE service area.
- VRE providing a boost to tourism opportunities to one of its member cities.

These opportunities are examples of the mostly unanimous support among those decision makers interviewed. The support of these leaders was evident in comments such as the following:

"The quality of life will be better off down the track."

"People drive to D.C. for more money with better paying jobs. They live here for the better lifestyle -- this [VRE] will help."

"There's pent-up demand for the VRE; they will fill up the trains in 30 days."

"This project will increase the value of housing in the area, especially those near the stations."

"People here are aware of the convenience of these trains."

"Stations can be the focus of growth in our community."

While decision makers tend to be positive generally towards civic ventures, the decision makers interviewed included interests that are sometimes in conflict with one another -- like homeowners and developers -- yet still all believed the VRE would be a

positive solution to the problem facing residents of the VRE service area -- traffic congestion.

The opinions and comments here represent the thoughts of those opinion leaders interviewed. A more detailed discussion of attitudes and comments on specific issues follows in the next sections.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE VIRGINIA RAILWAY EXPRESS

The fifteen key decision makers interviewed all had positive attitudes towards the VRE and its prospects to succeed.

"The quality of life will be better off down the track."

"VRE is a hot topic."

"People live here for the lifestyle and commute because of higher paying jobs -- VRE will help that equation."

While overall very supportive, those interviewed raised similar questions, like the focus group participants, regarding VRE being able to deliver on time and on budget.

"This region is 20 years behind the time in planning these transportation projects."

"You hear about these things but they never get done."

"We've had the plan for the Burke Center Station since 1972."

Those interviewed wanted more details about VRE's service plans, the benefits to be derived from the service and exactly how it was spending its money. In terms of potential solutions to the area's transportation dilemma one leader said, "The VRE is the best alternative to laying down more pavement." Most interviewed thought that if the VRE could succeed it would place itself ahead of other government agencies that had been unable to deliver transportation solutions in the past.

RIDERSHIP POTENTIAL

Most of those interviewed thought the VRE would exceed its ridership expectations.

"When one considers the lifestyle trade offs, VRE will be a better bet."

"There's enough pent-up demand for the VRE -- it will reach capacity within 30 days."

While there was positive belief that VRE would achieve its goals there were concerns raised about too many stops, fares that were impractical and the anxiety of just getting through local traffic to the stations.

FACTORS INFLUENCING RIDERSHIP

Convenience was thought of as the factor most influencing the decision to ride VRE. Most opinion leaders said price was not a strong issue because of the economic strength of the region:

"If the service is as direct as possible, people will ride it."

"People here are serious commuters but they won't ride VRE if they can't get a seat."

"There is almost a Long Island Railroad mentality people know about trains and people will use them."

"If they expand their service to all day, they'd even have more ridership. People want that added convenience."

Some interviewed thought that VRE should focus on businesses in the service area to provide initial ridership: "If they sell it to management, support would filter down to the rank and file." An overwhelming request of those interviewed was that the VRE expand its schedules and provide reverse commute opportunities.

"Bi-directional service is absolutely necessary."

"Our merchants are hopeful for weekend service for tourists."

THE INFLUENCE OF THE VRE ON BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH

The potential linkage between the VRE and the Northern Virginia region's economic "well being" is very apparent to those decision makers interviewed.

"We've talked with FORTUNE 100 companies which would locate here if they had this type of transportation."

"Now we'll be able to attract the lobbying and trade associations from D.C. to relocate here because VRE will be their link to Capital Hill."

"More than 20 percent of our visitors come from areas which make it convenient for them to ride VRE."

Several of those interviewed had direct business plans which would impact VRE ridership involving development around the proposed stations. Major employers interviewed claimed that they would encourage ridership by their employees and perhaps adapt work schedules to VRE schedules (assuming availability of reverse commute service). In this regard all requested that the VRE do a better job of communicating to the private sector.

"This thing must be marketed on every level."

"The absence of public information makes people apprehensive like this will be another Springfield Bypass project."

It was the general belief of those interviewed that there would be development potential near to stations. One particular interest among at least two of those interviewed was to receive General Services Administration approval for the areas around VRE stations to be commuter accessible thereby opening up the potential for relocation of federal agencies to the VRE service area.

"Very few are betting on the VRE now but if it comes through it could change everything."

"The VRE will increase the retail value of housing in Northern Virginia."

These comments from two decision makers reflect the attitudes of most of those interviewed that the VRE stations would eventually become centers for focused work and residential activity.

THE FACTOR MOST CRUCIAL TO VRE'S SUCCESS

Those interviewed had a wide variety of opinions as to the most crucial factor, but they always mentioned convenient, quality service.

"On opening day they must have a quality service right out of the block."

"It can't be viewed as a trolley; it must be a high level of service with full amenities."

"On time performance is the key to getting these types of riders."

"Train service must be expanded, what we heard about is not sufficient."

"They should add a reverse commute trip."

"Project timing and delivery is important."

"Design of parking and safety is key to me. The stations must have easy access and security must be provided."

More cooperation between the agencies who had responsibility for transportation was also mentioned as a key to success. One person commented: "No one understands what these people are in business for -- VRE, NVTC and now PRTC."

CONCLUSIONS FROM INTERVIEWS

The 15 decision makers interviewed were strong in their belief that the VRE was necessary and that it would succeed. The motivation and optimism of those interviewed, as witnessed by solid plans to develop areas around stations, programs to lure new business to the region with VRE service as the incentive and interest in adjusting work schedules to match VRE schedules should be viewed as a solid vote of support for VRE. What is crucial now, in the opinion of those interviewed, is that VRE build this "linkage" through increased two-way communication and a commitment to quality and convenient service.