

Commuters welcome first VRE trains from Spotsylvania station

SCOTT SHENK/THE FREE LANCE-STAR | Posted: Monday, November 16, 2015 7:33 am

As the first riders boarded the first Virginia Railway Express train at the new Spotsylvania County station early Monday morning, a smiling Frank McCoy stopped to ask a friend if she was getting on.

No, she said, she was waiting for the next one.

McCoy, who lives along nearby Jim Morris Road, said he was getting on the waiting “express” train for early-bird commuters.

“I could bike or walk if I wanted,” he said, looking at the silver double-decker train. “I’ve been waiting for this a long time.”

McCoy, who used to board VRE trains in downtown Fredericksburg and at Leeland Station in southern Stafford County for a leg of his commute to Rosslyn, was one of hundreds of riders to use the new train station Monday morning in the Crossroads Station development off the U.S. 17 Bypass.

It was chilly and dark out at 4:57 a.m., when the first train left the station, which now serves as the southern terminus for the Fredericksburg line. About 5,000 commuters ride the trains two ways each weekday.

Throughout the morning, cars slowly filled sections of the mammoth 1,500-space parking lot as a steady stream of riders made their way to the covered 700-foot platform and boarded trains headed north. All of it was well-lit before the sunrise.

At an enclosed waiting area, VRE workers manned tables with complementary coffee and pastries. They handed out commemorative tickets. VRE and county officials also were on hand to greet riders and see the trains leave the station.

After enduring years of delays and struggles with the project, Spotsylvania Supervisor Gary Skinner, a VRE Operations Board member, looked like he was ready to break out the cigars.

“There have been so many people involved in this,” Skinner said between greeting riders and talking to television news crews.



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Passengers make their way across the platform as they prepare to board 5:57 a.m. VRE train at Spotsylvania's new station.

The first official target for the station's opening was late 2013, but that didn't happen because of technical and funding issues.

Once those issues were dealt with, the county ran into a problem getting the property needed for the parking lot. That issue is still working its way through the court system, but the Virginia Department of Transportation used eminent domain, allowing work to start.

There were numerous other targeted openings dates for the station, all eventually replaced with new ones.

Then, earlier this year, a companion project hit the skids when VRE suspended the contractor building a new section of third track, citing safety violations. That delayed the project for months, but crews eventually got back to work and that project is expected to be completed next month.

The approximately \$15 million station is expected to ease the parking crunch downtown and at Leeland Station. Many of the riders at the Spotsylvania station Monday morning said they had been using both of the other stations.

Felicia Taylor used to park at Leeland and downtown, and sometimes she would go to Quantico. But on Monday morning, she made the quick trip from Lee's Parke to the Spotsylvania station.

"Ten minutes," said Taylor as she waited for her train. "I timed it."

About five hours after the new station's first train departed, local, state and federal politicians came out for a ribbon-cutting ceremony. Speakers included Rep. Dave Brat, R-7th District; Rep. Rob Wittman, R-1st District, state Sen. Bryce Reeves, R-Spotsylvania, in addition to Spotsylvania supervisors Skinner and Greg Cebula.

"Nothing like success to bring out a whole bunch of politicians," joked Fairfax County Supervisor John Cook, who chairs the VRE Operations Board.

Brat's remarks at time sounded like a stump speech, as he talked about out-of-control federal spending and the national debt. He said the VRE station "looks like a no-brainer" when using the basic economic principle that benefits should outweigh costs.

"Your role matters more and more and more," he told local and state officials. "Because the federal pot of money's slowing down—I'm just telling you what's going to happen."

Skinner, who received a standing ovation, noted that voters re-elected him in 2009 on a campaign platform of bringing VRE to the county. If he and Benjamin Pitts hadn't been elected that year, he said, "This would not be here today."

"That was a very critical election, and we both got it, so we spoke for the people, I think, at that time," said Skinner, who spent the better part of 10 minutes thanking a long list of people by name.

