



7 August 2020

IPART – Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal New South Wales
Level 15, 2-24 Rawson Place
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Sir/Madam,

Submission to IPART Review of Rural and Regional Bus Fares 2021-2025: Coffs Harbour City Council officer submission

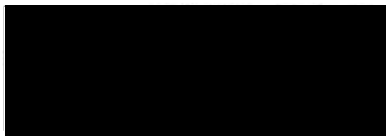
Coffs Harbour City Council officer submission from: – Tim Ruge (Transport Planning); Diana Weekes (Community Safety Programs Officer); and Heather Reid (Community Planning & Engagement).

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission on rural and regional bus fares.

The following provides an overview of the Coffs Harbour LGA broader issues relating to bus services; our future direction for bus services; and specific responses relating to some of the key questions of the review.

For further information, please contact Tim Ruge on [REDACTED] E tim.ruge@chcc.nsw.gov.au

Yours faithfully



Tim Ruge
Urban Engineer | Local Planning | Sustainable Communities
Coffs Harbour City Council

Summary

In summary, we are supportive of the approach to set fares so that people with limited travel options have reasonable access to transport within their local communities. This is particularly relevant to Coffs Harbour where we have relatively high levels of aged residents, disadvantaged communities and new arrivals. Some of our key comments or suggestions are:

- Review of eligibility criteria for free school bus services and easier and more affordable options for payment for irregular bus use if a student is not eligible for free travel;
- Opal system – it is recognised introduction of such a system is costly but it is considered desirable;
- Access to bus service information:
 - digital information is now readily accessible and relatively easy to use for people comfortable with app technology. More conventional forms of bus timetable data and route maps are now easier to access online. Provided hard copies are readily available and easy to use for patrons this matter is not considered a major issue.
- Information on fares is relatively difficult to access and fares are not readily obvious in terms of determining the cost from A to B. It is suggested that:
 - fares are stipulated for indicative trips (specific origins / destinations) in addition to the fare based on section data. Consideration also needs to be given to how to provide this data to members of the community who are unable or unconfident with accessing data online or who do not use English as a first language.
 - It would be beneficial for apps such as 'AnyTrip' to provide fare data for searched trips with an easy way of categorising different fares (eg adult fares vs concessions, and simple explanation of who is eligible for concessions etc).
- On-demand transport:
 - on-demand trials have been undertaken in Coffs Harbour eg "Woopi Connect". Anecdotal evidence indicates support for this type of service and to conduct further trials elsewhere in the LGA;
 - Council is aiming to utilise this type of service (amongst others) to improve future services such as providing a 'first and last mile' complementary service to a more direct and frequent bus service operating along the highway or trunk roads, or direct to a desired destination.

Background Information for Coffs Harbour

Overview of transport challenges

A significant proportion of Coffs Harbour's population experiences transport challenges. This partly relates to our relatively high population of: people aged over 65; new arrivals; and people with a relatively high level of socio-economic disadvantage. Coffs Harbour is a Refugee Welcome Zone and around 1,000 refugees have resettled in the area since 2005.

Transport challenges in Coffs Harbour also relates to the dispersed nature of residential areas in the LGA relative to key service centres and a transport system largely dependent on private use. Although Council is actively pursuing improved transport options such as walking, cycling, and more efficient bus services, this transport challenge will remain an issue in the foreseeable future.

Overview of Council transport initiatives being developed with TfNSW

Coffs Harbour City Council is currently developing a transport strategy (our 'Place and Movement Strategy') in collaboration with TfNSW. A focus of the strategy is 'rethinking our bus networks and community transport'.

TfNSW has identified Coffs Harbour as a priority regional city to improve local bus services. They are currently engaging with bus operators to achieve routes that are more efficient and identify future alternatives and complementary arrangements such as app-based on-demand services.

Council's Place and Movement Strategy is aiming to provide a fast and frequent 'trunk service' along key precinct connectors supported by walkable connections and other 'first and last mile' complementary services to get to and from these trunk stops.

Trials using new technologies are already underway in Coffs Harbour:

- **Busbot:** we are the first regional town in Australia to trial a driverless vehicle. The project, managed by Busways in partnership with TfNSW, EasyMile and Council, is trialling a driverless minibus to help us understand how this technology can benefit public transport in Coffs Harbour
- **Woopi Connect:** an on-demand trial designed to give the Woolgoolga community greater flexibility with their transport options. The service can be booked using an app or the phone to pick up customers at or near their home and take them to any destination within the area. The trial will help us understand how this can improve future services such as providing a 'first and last mile' complementary service to a more direct and frequent bus service operating along the highway or trunk roads.

In addition, the Community Transport Company (TCTC) in Coffs Harbour provides 'door to door' transport services (with 'elbow' service) for the community who have trouble getting out and about. TCTC is also actively looking at innovative ways to improve transport options such as a MaaS - Mobility as a Service.

Who uses our bus services and why others don't

As noted in the Issues Paper, our bus services (excluding school buses) are largely utilised by those who can't drive or can't afford a car. This is borne out in transport statistics for our LGA where:

- Less than 1% of the population use the bus service to travel to work. It is noted that less than 1% of the population cycle to travel to work, and about 2% walk to work.
- Similarly, less than 1% of visitors to one of the major shopping centres in Coffs Harbour (Park Beach Plaza) travel by bus. It is noted there is significant number disadvantaged people in walkable distance to this shopping centre.

Driving is by far the most popular method of travel to work by Coffs residents, accounting for 82% of the modal split for the journey to work. Close to 90% travel to work by car when you include passengers in private vehicles.

Coffs Harbour’s high private car modal split is influenced by a variety of factors including abundant and free car parking, simple habit, and the lack of desirable public and active transport alternatives. Travel times by bus are generally two to three times longer (35 to 60 minutes by bus from distanced locations (Toormina or Woolgoolga) into Coffs Harbour City Centre compared to a 10 to 25 minutes by car). Bus fares are about 1.5 to 2.5 times more than car running costs (fuel, tyres, servicing – using an average running cost of 17c/km) – refer to indicative examples below. And the frequency of services can be severely limited from some centres with only two services a day in many cases.

	Bus			Car		
	Distance (km)	Time (min)	Fares	Distance (km)	Time (min)	Running Cost
Sawtell to Coffs	12.7	40	\$5.10	12.7	15	\$2.16
Woolgoolga to Coffs	26	34	\$7.60	26	23	\$4.42
Woolgoolga to Coffs	26	58	\$7.60	26	23	\$4.42
Toormina to Coffs	9.1	37	\$3.60	9.1	11	\$1.55

In short, there is currently no carrot nor stick in Coffs Harbour to encourage workers or shoppers to use bus services other than the inability to drive or afford to own/operate a car. That said, Council is actively pursuing (in collaboration with TfNSW) various measures to not only promote a modal shift to public and active transport but to also make it easier and more convenient for current users or our bus services.

What can our community afford?

Coffs Harbour LGA has an overall similar level of disadvantage and low-income households as Regional NSW as a whole (967 score for Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage compared to 971 for Regional NSW, and 22.3% of households being categorised as low-income households compared to 22.0% for Regional NSW – 2016 census data).

In the order of 200 to 300 low-income households are located in more dispersed areas of the LGA where bus services are limited and walking or cycling is not an option for access to basic services. This characteristic is worsening in recent years due to a shortage of available affordable housing in forcing financially stressed to relocate further away from our main centres and associated essential services.

Overview of current fares

As indicated in Figure 1 of the Issues Paper, bus fares in Coffs Harbour generally reflect iPART maximum fares.

Figure 1. iPART current maximum bus fares compared to actual bus fares (\$2020)



Suggestions and Comments

Review of eligibility criteria for free school bus services

It is requested that the eligibility criteria for free school travel passes is reviewed. It is considered that the criteria for a free school travel pass can often impact adversely on the disadvantaged and increase private car trips to schools for drop off/pick up. While the logic underpinning the criteria is supported (ie encouraging children in close proximity to walk or cycle) it is often undermined in many localities by poor path networks and unsafe crossings.

Walking and cycling connections in Coffs Harbour are often limited or unsafe due to the relatively low-density / sprawled nature of development and the corresponding low funding of adequate paths and safe road crossings. This can mean that when students are not beyond the distance criteria for eligibility but have a relatively unsafe / undesirable walking or cycling route to school, the option is either pay for bus travel, be driven by parents/carers, or negotiate an unsafe / undesirable route. This can:

- place an additional financial burden on disadvantaged families;
- cause issues for disadvantaged families where the elder children are often 'carers' for the younger siblings and the elder children are no longer eligible for free travel nor financially able to accompany the younger ones on the bus travel;
- simply discourage bus travel as younger children feel embarrassed having to pay compared to their friends who or eligible for passes and subsequently often results in the child convincing the parent/carer to drive them to school;
- create an increased risk of a road accident if the student is forced to walk or cycle to school along an unsafe route
- establish a negative attitude to walking / cycling if the student is forced to negotiate an undesirable route to school.

It is noted there are options for purchasing School Term Bus Passes for students ineligible for free travel. It is considered that the cost of these may be prohibitive for some families (eg for both morning and afternoon bus travel the cost is \$80 per term per student – which equates to \$8 per week). *Suggestion: could a concession rate be offered and/or an 'Opal card' type system that can be topped up for irregular use?*

Is bus service information easy to access

Recent online data and apps has made bus service / timetable information readily and easily available for people who have access to technology and are comfortable using this technology. It is noted that very recently real-time data is now readily accessible via apps.

More conventional forms of bus timetable data and route maps have also improved, however digital access is generally still required to access these.

Are fares easy to understand?

Information on fares is relatively difficult to access and not readily obvious in terms of determining the cost from A to B.

Finding the fares online is difficult and only general information appears to be accessible in terms of cost per number of sections travelled. As an example: *in a separate link you can open the travel maps but it is difficult to ascertain what dictates a 'section'. One bus company was phoned as it wasn't obvious how to gather the fare information. Firstly, the top corner lines needed to be selected, then 'fares' typed into a search bar. Next, you needed to scroll down through some information and choose a link for rural and regional fare changes from Jan 1 2020. This gave section fares but you then needed to go back a page and scroll to the 'Coffs Harbour Regional Network' link to find out the routes. However, it was not clear where the sections start and finish. Even the assistant from the company found these areas on their site a challenge to find and could not advise the delineations of sections. Hence, our CALD community would also find this information a challenge to find.*

It would greatly assist to have fares stipulated for indicative trips (specific origins / destinations). It would also be very beneficial for apps such as 'AnyTrip' to provide fare data for searched trips with an easy way of categorising different fares (eg adult fares vs concessions, and simple explanation of who is eligible for concessions etc).

Consideration also needs to be given to how to provide this data to members of the community who are unable or unconfident with accessing data online or who do not use English as a first language.

Payment options

Ideally, implementation of the Opal system is considered desirable.

Are the needs of people with limited transport options in your community being met by local buses? How are the demographics in your community changing as a result of migration to and from the area?

The provision of accessible and reliable public transport is vital to help migrants and new arrivals travel to services, schools and employment. Like many regional towns, Coffs Harbour is an extremely car dependent city with a lack of viable public transport services, even within the key precincts. Transportation has become a key barrier for achieving some of the key settlement outcomes, such as employment and education.

A key program to assist with integration for new arrivals of our culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) community is attending AMEP classes - the Adult Migrant English Program which provides up to 510 hours of English language tuition. Critical to new arrivals embracing and completing this program is an easy and affordable bus service from key centres to our various TAFE locations. This also applies to gaining initial employment including seasonal employment in the local blueberry industry whereby an easy and affordable bus service from key centres to locations such as Corindi is critical.

Obtaining an Australian drivers licences also presents barriers for new arrivals. Transferring an overseas driver licence is reportedly expensive, and there are inconsistencies in support provided by from employment agencies to assist new arrivals in obtaining their Australian licence (either via transfer or learner-driver programs). Some cohorts of new arrivals find obtaining a license relatively achievable, due to prior driving experience and prior possession of an international license. Other

members of the new arrival community have not had such experience and are neither prepared nor confident to drive.

In regard to Coffs Harbour's elderly population engaging in everyday life, poor quality footpath networks, limited public transport, lack of street lighting and high traffic levels and poor road crossings limit older people's ability to connect and interact.

Are you interested in improving public transport options to support tourism in your region? If so, what changes do you think local bus services could make that would help?

Council is looking to improve bus services to support current users, attract commuters and support tourism. The following two broad strategies are being considered in regard to assisting tourism:

- Providing a faster and more frequent 'trunk service' between northern beach suburbs and our city centre (and from southern precincts of Sawtell, Toormina and East Boambee) supported by 'complementary services such as on-demand services to get to and from these trunk stops.
- Establishing a simple, frequent, readily accessible and direct circular route between our City Centre, Jetty precinct and Park Beach precinct with a simple fare/payment system and real-time data display at key stops.

On-demand bus services

As indicated previously, on-demand trials have been undertaken in Coffs Harbour. Anecdotal evidence indicates support for the 'Woopi Connect' trial in Woolgoolga and Council has been approached by community members to conduct further trials in Toormina and west of the highway in our LGA.

Council is aiming to utilise this type of service (amongst others) to improve future services such as providing a 'first and last mile' complementary service to a more direct and frequent bus service operating along the highway or trunk roads, or direct to a desired destination.