

IPART and public transport fares in Sydney

I am strongly object to the majority of recommendations in the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) major review of public transport fares in Sydney and surrounding areas.

By recommending changes to the current frequency discount, daily and weekly price caps and increasing Sunday fares, this is in direct contrast to the reason Sydney commuters were encouraged – then forced due to the withdrawal of paper tickets – to move to the Opal card system in the first place. To change the goalposts is very disappointing for regular public transport users like myself, it will mean at least being \$300 worse off on my estimates. Many of my work colleagues who live in Cronulla and Western Sydney will have to re-work their budgets, especially if the 10 most expensive journeys proposal is enacted. To say for many very frequent users, “this (frequent user) discount will continue to be substantial” (page 5) is disingenuous in the least, and simply not correct for a large majority of regular public transport users.

Former Transport Minister Gladys Berejiklian and present Minister Andrew Constance have constantly said 90 per cent of commuters would be the same or better off financially using the Opal card system – this has certainly not been the case when you compare the MyMulti Yearly or even Monthly paper ticket (now no longer available).

With the further changes proposed by IPART, many commuters will be significantly worse off.

Tampering with the discounted journey option will in no way encourage greater use of public transport and IPART fails to sufficiently argue how this would encourage the efficient use of public transport. Again this has been promoted heavily by the NSW Department of Transport and relevant Ministers as a major bonus of the Opal Card – to essentially take this benefit away from city Mon-Friday 9am-5pm workers is discriminatory in the extreme. For instance, most workers have no control over trying to get their employer to change their starting or finishing times to use the off-peak fare options available for only rail journeys. This option is not even available for bus users.

Why can't the discount remain say for after the 8 most expensive journeys to at least discourage the oft reported customer behaviour of taking multiple shorter trips earlier in the week so that any trips later in the week are free? If the discount is changed to the 8 most expensive journeys or even 9 most expensive journeys (the discount is available in Queensland after 9 journeys) this will ensure this Mon-Tues/early in the week user behaviour is no longer warranted – although given it is 2015 and the Opal card is based on GPS and algorithm technology, I find it amazing that the instances of users tapping on at Pyrmont light rail and not physically boarding the light rail or a customer tapping on a bus with five different Opal cards then getting off at the next stop is not able to be thwarted by this new technology.

Also has IPART configured how much revenue the NSW Government will now forgo from these earlier in the week shorter trips if the discount for frequent customers is changed? Not forgetting Minister Berejiklian actively encouraged Opal users to rort the system or at the very least find ways of exploiting it.

Many public transport users would have liked the opportunity of working out how these proposed changes – particularly the draft fares and straight line configurations involving distance - will actually impact on them. I could find no calculator to estimate how my regular Tempe-Martin Place or Wynyard-Canterbury journeys would be charged under the proposed changes. There is already confusion around Tempe charges with the 3.2km addition to all City stations beyond Central. For

instance will the Tempe-Martin Place fall within the 3 to less than 8km draft distance band, roughly the same I am paying now around \$35 a week, or will it be just outside the 8km distance – hence costing me nearly \$300 extra a year, and even more from July 2017.

The Cronulla straight line example (p18) was helpful for my work colleagues who live in the Shire, but again they are not sure if they fall into the 25km distance band given some work at Martin Place or Kings Cross. Again more information should have been provided for users when these major changes are being proposed. This could be a double whammy with increased fares and changes to the weekly fare reward – again this does not fit with the original IPART brief of encouraging efficient use and delivery of public transport while minimising the impact on customers and encouraging greater use of public transport. To suggest 20 per cent of single-mode public transport customers would be paying more than 20 per cent more than they are currently paying (p8) is a significant risk and should not be accepted by the NSW Government.

There are already ongoing glitches with the Opal card system with the wrong fares being charged and very little recourse unless users log on and thoroughly go through each fare. To suggest Opal users need to pay for all their journeys before an eventual travel credit may or may not arrive is a totally unnecessary bureaucratic nightmare. This will particularly affect low-income users who may not have the additional funds available - the current system where fares are free after 8 journeys is a lot fairer, efficient and transparent.

The statement on P24 of the report that the travel credit scheme “would be more efficient than the current arrangements as it would mean that those in **full-time employment** (my emphasis) only receive the discount if they make additional discretionary journeys” is a very loaded and judgemental comment from an independent body attempting to justify a weekly travel credit scheme which is ultimately more expensive for the majority of users, and actively discriminates against low-income earners, the unemployed and others who may not have enough money on their Opal card to pay for every trip until a travel credit may eventually be paid. I would urge the NSW Government to reject this scheme on these grounds alone.

In short, the suggested integrated fares proposal for customers using two or more modes to complete a journey is fair and equitable. The proposed weekly travel credit scheme is neither fair nor equitable. I am facing paying more than 20 per cent than I am now and I live less than 10km from the Sydney CBD. Going on IPART’s own figures, if 40 per cent of Opal customers make more than eight journeys, why are they expected to be even further disadvantaged with the proposed travel credit scheme (10 journeys) on top of higher fares and raised daily caps – let alone the \$2.50 cap on Sundays – introduced with great fanfare by the former Minister of Transport to promote greater use of public transport. The MyMulti yearly ticket cost \$1650 (inc GST) which included unlimited travel across different modes, the Opal has rarely been the same value even taking into account the free trips.

I won’t add any further comment on the Gold Card suggestions as no NSW Government will make these politically unsavoury changes. Our pensioners are doing it tough enough without facing increased public transport costs.

I strongly believe the \$2.50 daily cap on Sunday should stay to encourage families to enjoy the weekend together on public transport – again widely promoted by the NSW Government.

If a weekly travel credit scheme is introduced, it should be limited to the eight most expensive journeys. However I don’t believe IPART has successfully argued how this scheme is making the Opal system more fairer, efficient and equitable for users.

It is extremely unfair for the NSW Government to promote the Opal card as a better alternative to paper tickets. One of the reasons people moved to the Opal was the incentive of free trips after 8 journeys. If this is changed to 10 journeys, let alone the 10 most expensive journeys, I think this is underhanded and a terrible disincentive for people in Sydney to use public transport.