

Opal is a good system but we can plant the seed for a far better model. The idea is for a transport levy, like Medicare, to fund a state-wide system, providing free public transport to all. This model would provide more equity and more funding, therefore enabling an enduring, better public transport system.

The benefits are many; higher patronage, more funds, fewer private cars on the road, providing a simple system which does not rely on tricks to change the behaviour of commuters.

Public transport is an essential requirement of any metropolitan city. A good system should provide safe, fast and comfortable movement throughout a city 24/7, enabling essential travel and aiding economic activity. A good system will not only deter people from driving but it will entice people to enjoy moving about, freely and comfortably. Good public transport stimulates the economy, it enables great places, great activities and a wonderful public domain.

Public transport is not an optional substitute for private motor vehicles. It is a right of all citizens and provides substantial benefits to the whole community. Public access to all streets and roads is currently almost entirely free, which means they are funded by the state. Therefore access to an efficient, safe, public transport system could also be fully funded by the state.

The Opal card system has transformed the use of public transport in broader Metropolitan Sydney. People have access to a large area stretching from the North Coast to the South Coast and also to beyond the Blue Mountains, using an integrated and sophisticated system. It has simplified ticketing management and provides obvious benefits to commuters and to Transport for NSW.

However, the system itself is very costly, far from equitable and it leads to inefficient and unproductive patterns of behaviour by commuters.

Why is the Opal card system costly?

The Opal card system cost in the order of \$1b to implement and ongoing it will cost the state so much more, in management and lost fares.

Why is the Opal card system inequitable?

The system allows free travel after the first 8 fares, so if they happen to be bus rides a commuter can enjoy weekly travel for \$15. If they happen to be a combination of bus and rail or ferry and rail or bus and ferry, a commuter will pay \$60 per week. The system allows free return trips to some commuters, who travel within an hour but not to commuters who return after an hour. The Opal system has allowed some commuters to considerably reduce their annual costs, whilst others are paying significantly more.

What are the inefficient and unproductive behaviours caused by the Opal card system?

The system allows commuters to do dummy trips, that is, short trips which cost the least, in order to reach the \$15 daily maximum spend and therefore the 8 paid trips as quickly as possible. The system allows a commuter to tap on and off without travelling in order to clock a fare, adding up to the 8 trips. The system allows a commuter to pay twice or three or more times per trip with additional Opal cards, to clock up the 8 trips for friends and family. After all, what is wrong with paying more for public transport? With Opal, commuters are waiting till 9.00am or after 6.30pm to avoid travelling in peak periods.

The current treasurer, the Hon Gladys Berejiklian, actually promoted cost saving measures when she was transport minister and was introducing the Opal system to the state. The inequity is far reaching and Transport for NSW are fully aware of the decline in the fare box since the Opal system came into place.

What would be an equitable and economically viable fare system?

A state wide public transport levy of say, \$15-20 per week on all adults, would raise approximately \$2.7b - \$3.6b, (assuming 3.5million people are fare paying), to replace the current fare box, with additional funds being required by treasury as they are with the current system. The levy would mean no additional costs would have to be spent on ticketing, new turnstiles, including guards on trains and at stations checking for fare evasion. A modified Opal system could be maintained if Transport for NSW wanted to keep collecting data on commuter patterns.

A transport levy would mean much less inequity between commuters. It would ensure certainty and growth in revenues. The population in NSW is forecast to grow to 8 million people by around 2050. A levy would provide free public transport to every citizen in NSW. It would also mean no more ticketing guards would be required to fine people who are at the margins and cannot afford the current high costs of multi-modal transport.

A transport levy would entice people to take public transport whenever they need it rather than feel restricted because of cost. Simply this would grow overall patronage and significantly increase modal shift. There are significant advantages of running a public transport system with high patronage, the most obvious being fewer cars on the road and less demand on roads infrastructure.

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