

I would like to make the following submission to your inquiry.

As a rail commuter from Maitland to Newcastle, I note with interest Cityrail's proposal to you to increase fares by the CPI taking account of service improvements.

I would like to propose that there be no increase on this line because the current fares are already high and, in my view, not competitive with the alternative of driving one's own car. Secondly, there have been no service improvements on the line other than the very recent addition of one additional Endeavour 2-car set bringing this to a total of 5 sets now operating on the line. Even so, around half the services on the Hunter Valley city rail network are operated by the antiquated 620/720 rail cars and these are not due to be replaced until 2005 (see part 3.2.2 of Cityrail's submission page 24)

Rail fares are not competitive with car commuting

The present full fare from Maitland to Newcastle is \$8.80 return. By road, Maitland to Newcastle is approximately 35 kilometres or 70 kilometres round trip. What is the fuel cost of making this trip in some typical passenger cars? A large car like a current VX Holden 6 cylinder Commodore has a fuel consumption of around 11 litres per 100 kilometres for city driving. That means that it would use 7.7 litres of fuel to travel 70 kilometres. At a price of 90 cents per litre that is a fuel cost of \$6.93 – this is almost \$2 less than the return rail fare. If a commuter made 185 trips per year, this saving would be about \$375 per year and that would be a healthy contribution to the fixed costs of operating the car.

For a smaller car, which you might expect a regular commuter to use, the saving by driving is much greater. A 1.8 litre Holden Astra which uses around 8.5 litres per 100 kilometres in the city would use only 6 litres of fuel on the 70 kilometre trip. That is a fuel cost of \$5.40 –or a \$3.40 saving over the daily train fare. Again, over 185 commuting trips that would amount to a saving of \$630 per year (and probably more than pay for registration and CTP).

One Newcastle building society has a large billboard ad showing traffic congestion with the caption "Sydney it ain't". This along with other similar posters is intended to highlight the benefits of living in the Hunter. My point in raising this is to illustrate that the difference in the rail fare and the fuel cost does work against encouraging people around Newcastle to use the train. Unlike Sydney, there is little traffic congestion and parking is often free. In this situation, if the train costs more than driving, why take the train? Perhaps more people would use the train if rail fares were more competitive with the cost of driving.

Service improvements

Unlike Sydney, some Hunter services are still provided by antiquated diesel trains. These trains are not air-conditioned, have opening windows and ancient gas radiators for winter heating. The glazing or tinting on most windows is so crazed that in many cases passengers cannot even see out the windows – especially if the sun is shining on the window.

In the last 12 months, the carriages have been fitted with locking doors as a safety precaution. However, the doors have to be manually closed by the last passenger entering or leaving the train. If the passenger doesn't do this, the guard has to walk up the platform and close the door. (yes, it's true in the 21st century the guard has to walk up the platform to close the doors) As a result, services with the older trains, which used to be served by a 4 car train have been reduced to 2 car trains. This reduces any delays caused by the guard having to walk the length of the train to close doors. However, it also leads to some overcrowding of peak services. I have also known the trains to be parked overnight with the windows left open (especially after a hot summer day). Overnight rain has effectively drenched the inside of the carriage. In this situation, who would want to pay \$8.80 for a return ticket to Newcastle when they could drive in air-conditioned comfort listening to the radio or a favourite CD and at a lower cost.

Conclusion

It would be inappropriate to increase Hunter rail fares until services improve with the new trains in 2005 (let's hope they are better than the millennium trains). Rather consideration should be given to reducing fares as a means of encouraging people to use the trains instead of their cars.

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