

Submission on Determination of CityRail and TravelPass Fares

I wish to respond to the RailCorp proposal for fare increases.

Like many in the community, my family and I are dismayed that such a proposal should even be considered in light of the continued failure of the transport authorities to deliver a safe, reliable service to the public of NSW.

In light of the near collapse of the system in 2004, the State Government had the sense to suspend any further consideration of fare increases. It was only by halving services in last year's change of timetable that RailCorp was able to recover anything approximating functional operations. Even with such greatly reduced services, however, delays and breakdowns continue to plague the system.

Despite presenting these service cuts as emergency measures, there has been no effort, or indeed mention, of their ever being restored. Like thousands of others, we wish to know why we should pay up to 25% more for a fraction of the service?

Like most, our services on the Bankstown line have been halved in off peak times from quarter to half hourly. Our peak hour services, too, have also been cut, despite the rationale for these 'emergency' measures being to concentrate on improved services in peak times.

As an example, two existing peak services to the city from Hurlstone Park, 8:15 and 9:01am, were abolished in the new timetable. There remain gaps of up to twenty minutes between trains in peak periods, and, as a result, the few remaining services are, of course, much more crowded and uncomfortable. It is regularly impossible to get on to remaining services due to overcrowding. Overcrowding remains a central complaint for most commuters.

With longer periods between services, cancellations also have a far greater impact – when you must wait half an hour for each service, a single cancellation, breakdown or station skipping incident will result in a delay of an hour or more.

Aside from a general objection to paying increased costs for a reduced service, we reject each of the specific justifications put forward by RailCorp for their proposed increases.

1. That fare increases are justified because of 'efficiency improvements'. All of RailCorp's submissions for the last decade have contained the same contention – that a current application for fare increases should be granted on the basis of promises for future improvements. This submission is no exception. To quote, 'RailCorp's focus through the KPI mechanism will be on ensuring that future customer service and efficiency improvements are identified and effected.'

The problem with this, quite obviously, is that RailCorp's promises have continually proven to be worthless. Despite using such assurances to gain approval for numerous increases and a steady expansion of cost recovery, standards have plummeted. The public has one answer for such promises from RailCorp - show us some genuine and sustained improvement, and then talk to

us about fare increases.

2. That fare revenues are not keeping pace with inflation. In the past, RailCorp has been granted increases well in advance of inflation, so maintaining parity is hardly a constant consideration. In this current application, the increases proposed for off-peak fares are massively beyond inflation, again, hardly consistent. RailCorp seeks to use and ignore inflation as a rationale as and when it suits them.

Why is cost recovery such a priority when the government still maintains itself to be committed to increasing public transport usage on environmental, social and urban planning grounds? Moreover, why should commuters be expected to pay twice – once through their taxes and again in escalating fares, for a service that continues to decline?

3. Improvements in service quality. The RailCorp submission makes much of the fact that on-time running has improved, but says nothing at all about the principal reason for this so-called improvement – THE HALVING OF SERVICES.

Even if RailCorp's figures are to be believed, which is not a given in light of past evidence, the so-called improvements have left on-time running well below acceptable levels. Even when running half the expected trains, they cannot deliver. Any suggestion that there has been a real improvement must be completely rejected as farcical.

4. Increased wage costs. How is this possible? The 2004 crisis was attributed to staff shortages requiring masses of overtime. With services halved, the need for such overtime must have disappeared, drastically reducing the wage bill. What are they spending the money on? Like all its commentary on costs and efficiencies, RailCorp's claims are unsubstantiated in their submission, relying on sweeping statements unsupported by independent data of any sort.

None of the arguments put forward by RailCorp explain their continued failure to deliver an acceptable standard of service. As with previous applications, they are seeking extraordinary increases on the basis of promises for future improvements which may never materialise. On past performance, this is the only safe assumption.

As has been widely documented, usage rates have plummeted – weekly passenger journeys falling by 500,000 in the past five years. Claims of a marginal improvement in recent usage levels must be viewed in light of this, and dismissed accordingly. Figures quoted by RailCorp on such improvements have also proven contradictory and inconsistent, and must be viewed with great skepticism.

No matter how RailCorp has tried to construe its surveys, polls, and complaint statistics, it cannot disguise the fact that the community remains dismissive of claims of a real commitment to improvement. Usage will not improve until we see genuine change.

And, of course, fare increases will do nothing but further deter any return to previous usage levels, further exacerbating Sydney's traffic congestion, and associated health and environmental problems.

Finally, it is beyond doubt that the massive 25% increase in off-peak fares

is an ambit claim to allow for the appearance of a compromise on a lesser increase. Until we see real improvement, however, there is absolutely no reasonable grounds for ANY increase.

On behalf of my family, friends, colleagues and neighbours, I urge the Tribunal to reflect a genuine degree of independence and fully reject this groundless and insulting proposal.

C. Martin,