

Statements against increase in rail fares

RailCorp has prepared a lengthy document to justify an increase in rail fares. It is a document written using a template and not by a government minister, a minister who has been elected to office to serve the community.

The key role of the Transport Minister is to provide the public with a transport system that is effective, safe, clean, affordable and satisfies the needs of those who either choose to use it or are forced to use it because of the lack of any viable alternatives.

The Key arguments noted have been extracted and boxed for easy reference. My comments follow each quote.

- RailCorp has to date absorbed the cost of fares not increasing in line with inflation since the last review due to past poor performance, which has increased the burden on NSW taxpayers who do not access the rail system;

Inflation is not a valid reason to increase fares now. Past poor performance has not proved to be sufficient motivation to display any improvements since the last fare increase. Until improvements are introduced, without detriment to other services, RailCorp does not deserve an automatic increase to cover inflation.

- RailCorp has put in place a KPI measurement framework to drive future efficiency gains and, consistent with the Parry Report recommendation, should be granted an increase in fares to compensate for movements in the CPI index;

The Parry Report does not travel by rail and needs to be discounted from the outset. The CPI should relate to goods and services that are provided, supported and guaranteed. RailCorp is unable to do this with current management framework.

- RailCorp's cost base has increased at a faster rate than the CPI (our input costs include items not measured in the CPI, such as steel and labour, which have experienced stronger price growth than the CPI);

One paragraph begs support from the CPI, then is thrown out in this paragraph. Where is the consistency and intellect within RailCorp? I have personally experienced over 30% increase (diesel for example) in the last twelve months, but now need to balance that within my overall budget. RailCorp needs to do the same.

- RailCorp has achieved significant improvements in service quality (including safety, security, cleaning, on-time running, cancellation and skipped stop improvements) and is committed to further improvements;

This statement is so untrue, it is almost laughable. Safety has not improved to the degree that commuters have no fears when travelling. Many incidents may go unreported, but are experienced almost on a daily basis. A group of two or three undesirables is enough to instil fear. Both Police and State Rail's own officers patrol stations and trains, but are so visible when present, that order is often maintained, but the threat returns when officers depart.

I would enjoy sending laundry bills for my clothing that has been soiled by dirty walls, seats, etc. Some carriages are clean, but many do not remain so. I don't have a solution for this, but RailCorp doesn't have one either. Increasing fares will not mean cleaner trains.

The press is full of stories, on a daily basis, where commuters have expressed concerns over the lateness of trains. Lost wages, rescheduling of appointments, additional interviews, missing connections, making up for lost time due to trains being late, all have their share of forming a part of the dissatisfaction with the current on-time running. Commitment to further improvements is as convincing as stating that improvements have already been implemented.

In a service industry, Customer Service rates pretty high. The culture developing within State Rail in particular, appears to be one of confusion and denial. Staff on stations are not informed, and when they are, they are seldom capable of relating clear and accurate information. I have experienced near panic conditions, definite contradiction and most often, a "don't care" attitude.

- the off-peak fare discount needs to be reviewed to assist in improving cost recovery with respect to off-peak fares.

This is one area that needs attention. Off-peak fares are discounted for one reason, to provide cheap transport when trains are almost empty. It attempts to recover some of the costs rather than have empty carriages travelling needlessly. Increase these fares and school excursions will diminish, shoppers will shop at the local corner shop at higher prices, because any savings in going to major shopping centres will be lost on higher fares. False economy for the family budget!

The entire issue of fare increases distils down to common sense and honesty. The general public cannot expect the State Government to produce miracles. State Rail is a legacy with many hurdles to get over, but it will not do so by increasing fares. Effective management and a commitment by all politicians may prove to be a way forward.

I propose an alternative approach. The government ministers in office are our servants, not our masters. For whatever reason, these duly elected officials chose a path of service, service to those that voted for them, and those who did not.

At a time when many of us are struggling with the fuel costs of today, why should our servants commute in publicly funded cars? Why should I travel in sweltering conditions, stuffed against a fellow commuter for half an hour or more, when John Watkins travels in air conditioned comfort, at my cost?

Until the present government get sober itself sufficiently to accept its responsibilities in good faith, until all politicians travel by public transport and have all government cars sold and proceeds returned to public coffers, until we have honest ministers, running honest portfolios, I cannot support any increase in fares.

Regards,

John Birett