

Nik & Blair
30/03/2006

Railcorp price submission

I wish to voice my opposition to CityRail's proposed price increases as per the attached document.

I wish to submit my opposition to CityRail's proposed fare review, as set out in the following paragraphs.

On page 3 of CityRail's submission, they argue, under the heading of "Summary of key arguments for changes to the fare structure":

- *Railcorp has put in place KPI's to drive future efficiency gains.*
They haven't made these figures publicly available, and I suspect that they do little to highlight the areas where they have the most problems. As an example, they can crow about a 91.5% on time running figure, but what percentage of the remainder is attributed to a particular service ?
- *Railcorp has achieved significant improvements in service quality.*
There may be areas where they have improved, but for the most part, those services which directly affect the train's journey have not. On page 16 of their submission, they acknowledge that service has improved in website info, train network signage / maps, personal safety on stations in peak times, 131 500 phone service, rubbish removal. They also acknowledge that they need to improve train punctuality, delays & cancellations, train crowding, train frequency and clarity of announcements. As a 5 day-a-week commuter during peak hours, I don't care about network signage. I know where I'm going. I don't care about personal safety in peak times - I suspect most of the danger is in off peak anyway. I have no use for the 131 500 line or website for up to the minute information. At best it is deliberately vague, and in practical terms, the website can say the trains are on time, but at the platform, they have cancelled your next train. I don't care about the rubbish. Sure it's nice to have it cleaned, but I'd rather my 2 trains an hour service were on time, thanks. Basically, any of their services which directly affect the train's punctuality, frequency, or comfort have not improved significantly. The items that have are just window dressings. I suspect that as I form part of the 75% of white collar workers, and am included in the 75% of peak passengers who travel 4 or more times per week, my fellow passengers included in the above percentages would share a similar view to myself.

Page 4 of the submission has CityRail making the wild claim that service reliability (on-time) running has improved by 20% since 2003 / 04. Let's not forget they changed the definition of on-time running to start with, so instead of the previous 2 minutes either side of the listed time, it is now 5 minutes. I interpret this to mean that despite doubling their on-time tolerances, their service has only improved by 20%. Hardly reassuring. What is the service reliability percentage if it is based on their 2003 / 04 definitions ?

On page 5, as further proof that they have improved their service quality, they claim that their 'mystery shopper' showed 82% office and 84% gate staff made a good impression and answered scripted questions accurately.

Could CityRail be any more deliberately vague ? Who was the mystery shopper ? Was it a beefy bloke dressed in singlet and thongs, a grandmotherly type, or a cute 20 year old in a mini? What time of day was this survey undertaken ? Was it during peak hour ? Was it on a really hot day when the trains were delayed ?

How many train staff did they approach? What is a reasonable sample size? The percentages mean absolutely nothing without any background information to reinforce their findings.

What 'scripted' questions were asked ? Where's the toilet, what platform is the next train to Central, how many stations from here to Central? etc. are not reasonable questions. Questions like: "why is the train late again? or, how long until the late running train actually shows up? are more relevant to us 75 percenters.

Another of their key arguments is their pride at getting all 141 Millennium trains into service. I'm sure they're very nice, but being on the Richmond line, I'm never going to benefit from them.

CityRail argue that there is 'improved customer access to service change information' (p5). The LDC screens are only at CBD stations and they only serve 2 purposes - to confuse the customer and to save station staff from having to make a well-informed announcement. I cannot count the number of times the LCD screen has shown the next train is due in 3,8,2,7,5,9,1,5etc. minutes. I've also watched the screen when it has said the train is due in 3 minutes, for it to be still displaying 3 minutes, 11 minutes later. At no point have rail staff made an announcement advising where the train is.

CityRail also have the gall to proudly announce that complaints have fallen by 15%. Does this have any correlation with the reduced patronage? Perhaps I, like many other passengers, have given up complaining. Every time we do, our complaints are ignored. Contrary to the 'mystery shopper' findings, it is my experience that station staff usually have 'only just been advised' when a train is cancelled, or 'don't know' when a late-running train will actually show up.

I take particular exception to their arrogant statement that 'studies have shown that the impact of fare changes on typical CityRail passengers' is inelastic. How dare they assume that we will tolerate a price rise. Do they understand their 'typical' passenger at all? I suspect they do not. There are many reasons why people catch trains to work, and it is not because CityRail are the best choice. Here's a more realistic list:

- * Many typical passengers do not own a car
 - * Many families cannot afford 2 cars
 - * The main Sydney arterial roads are a car park during peak hour
 - * Parking is not available for everyone to enable them to drive into the City.
- Put simply, for most of us 75%ers, there is no other option.

CityRail also has the audacity to quantify their price increase because rail is 'environmentally friendly'. We shouldn't have to pay extra for that privilege.

CityRail cannot quote figures when they are completely out of context. As an example, on p41 the have the temerity to compare per km costs with other countries. These mean nothing unless you compare it against average wages. I suspect that again, they are not comparing like with like. I note the source was from January 2002. Could they not provide more

accurate information, and I suspect that the Sydney entry is more current than 2002, making the whole table a worthless comparison.

I question the worth of their survey (p16). How many people were contacted in total? Does the 2755 train users they quote represent the 5% of the passenger market, thus meaning they really contacted 55,100 people? Or is the 2755 people the total number of calls placed, therefore meaning they only really spoke to 138 actual train users? In either case, it is still less than ½% of actual daily passenger numbers of 1,000,000. Hardly a representative sample.

What was the demographics of the people they did survey? I can almost guarantee that they 75% of those surveyed were not those same 75%ers who catch the train to work every day. If CityRail were serious about making improvements, they would have placed survey forms at all of their stations. That would have provided a real picture of what their core passengers think of their service.

As to my particular experiences with CityRail, I am nothing short of appalled. I live at Kellyville Ridge. The closest station is Schofields or Quakers Hill. I have lived here for the past 3 years, and prior to that, for 14 years in Quakers Hill. Since I have been catching the train from QH, the service has not improved at all. This despite the fact that the Northwest area is the highest housing growth area in Sydney. The service is disgusting. There is one train every half hour during peak hour. The new timetable has done absolutely nothing to ease the congested trains, and with the addition of Lidcombe station to this service, has made it slower.

Prior to the new timetable, I wrote to CityRail outlining my dissatisfaction with the Richmond line service. That email fell on deaf ears.

I cannot tell you how many times in the last couple of years I have had my train cancelled or 'indefinitely delayed'. That means that there is one train for the hour going to the Richmond line. Any guesses as to how packed that train is? The trains are that clogged after 7am that you are lucky to get a seat at Quakers Hill, which means you have to stand for the next 40 odd minutes before getting to work. The afternoon services are a disgrace. If you are catching the Richmond train after 4.30, you are lucky if you get a seat at Wynyard station, and you are really lucky if the weather isn't above 26 degrees, because it won't be air conditioned. I cannot tell you how disgusted I am that neither of those two services during peak hour are air conditioned in the afternoons in the middle of summer. Do CityRail even care that they are sending packed non air-conditioned trains to the hottest parts of Sydney? I'll bet not.

In fact, to be fair, I have been that disgusted with the Richmond line unreliability and overcrowding that I now drive to Seven Hills station. I have also had to alter my work hours because I know that any train after 7am is standing room only. Why should I pay extra for this privilege?

I know many people who live on the Richmond line, yet drive to Blacktown or Seven Hills to catch the train because the Richmond line service is such a disgrace. And yes, they're all 75%ers too. Why don't CityRail ask Richmond line passengers how they feel about the service?

I am fed up with the lack of communication from station staff in relation to late-running services. As a very recent case in point, on 27 March, I caught the 4.21 express Penrith service from Wynyard and got off at Parramatta. The weather was humid, I had a head cold, and the train was air conditioned. My usual train (the 4.24 Emu Plains service) is never air conditioned, so I thought I'd get a little bit of relief by catching the 4.21 service.

I arrived at Parramatta at approx. 4.52 – the indicator board said the Emu Plains service was due in 6 minutes. At 4.57, station staff announced that the 4.58 train was running approximately 10 minutes late. Around 3-5 minutes later, they announced that this service was now running 30 minutes late. The indicator board still said 6 minutes.

I went to the station master's office and asked why they left the announcement so late, given the train should have left Wynyard at 4.24. I was advised that they didn't know – they had only just been told. I asked where was that particular train now? Nope. No joy there either. They didn't know. I asked why neither of the two express trains to Penrith / Emu Plains (4.21 and 4.36 from Wynyard) couldn't have stopped at Westmead or Seven Hills (it would have been easy for one the first service to stop at Westmead, and the second at Seven Hills). It wouldn't have been hard to work out that a large portion of the stranded passengers from the late service were going to both of these stations. Again, I couldn't get an answer. I caught the packed Richmond train when it arrived, but did find out the next day that the Penrith train was subsequently cancelled.

I highlight this as an example of the poor communication within CityRail. This is not an exception, this is the usual standard of service we have come to expect. I cannot believe that the train vanished. Did it leave the city on time? Where was it until the Parramatta staff were advised at 4.57? Somebody must have known well before that time that the train was running late. How hard is it for station staff to phone ahead and advise the train is late? If the train was late, or cancelled from the city, it would take all of about 10 minutes to call all of the stations that it stops at to advise of the delay. This means that passengers would have ample warning, and could catch an all stations train, instead of being kept in the dark until the last minute. Who makes the decision to alter the stopping pattern to pick up some of the stranded passengers?

It is this lack of action and initiative that has continually made catching the train an unpleasant experience. It is the lack of information or knowledge from station staff that usually stops me from asking questions in the first place, because I know that I'm just wasting my time. It is the fact that every time I have called CityRail in the past to complain, I get a half-hearted apology (usually due to the weather or some other equally lame excuse), but never a proactive response on how they'll improve their communication. This apathy means I don't bother to complain any more. It's just a waste of my time. I've been complaining about the Richmond line for years, and have yet to see one improvement. How proud CityRail must be of the Richmond line service. Over 17 years I have had to travel on this line, and not one improvement. Not one additional service during peak hour, not one less stop to make the journey quicker, not one replacement service when the only service for half an hour is cancelled. What a joke.

I do notice that the North Sydney to Hornsby via Strathfield trains which leave Wynyard between 4.00pm and 4.40pm are generally less than 1/3 full. Why haven't they had their services reduced to allow more services on the choked services?

They do note that the new Northwestern line will be finished in 2017. Great. That will mean that since I started work in 1989 there will have been no service improvements to this region for at least 28 years. How many more people will have moved into Schofields, Rouse Hill, Kellyville, Riverstone, Annangrove et al by then?

As a last point, I would really be interested to know how many CityRail staff involved in putting together this proposal are actually 75%ers? Less than 75%, and I could just about guarantee that. Perhaps if they were made to travel on the worst services / lines for several months they would understand their market a little more.

In conclusion, I do not believe that CityRail have done enough to my train services for me to agree to a price increase.