Introduction

My submission is based on my experience of CityRail as a commuter travelling from Hamlyn Terrace to Alexandria and return every day. This usually involves the 5.26 a.m. train from Newcastle followed by the 8.23 a.m. train from Central to East Hills—if I am extremely lucky—or the 8.34 a.m. Central to Macarthur train which I catch one stop to Green Square.

The return journey usually begins with the 3.45 p.m. train from East Hills to the city which I catch at Green Square at 4.21 p.m. to Central. The rest of the journey is usually on the 4.45 p.m. train from Central to Newcastle. I commence my journeys from either Warnervale or Wyong.

I work as a self-employed consultant/contractor and so, my time means money and time lost results in a direct loss of income.

I leave home at about 6.15 a.m. to catch the train at 6.32 a.m. at Warnervale or at Wyong and do not arrive home until between 6.45 p.m. and 7.00 p.m. each day. Of those almost 13 hours each day, I am only able to invoice 7 hours total. Under such circumstances, I regard all my free time as precious and I place a similar value on the time I spend with my family as I do the time I spend away from them.

Prior to September 2005, I was easily able to get to my principal client's office by 8.30 a.m. and commence work—so long as the trains ran on time. Following the revisions to the timetable introduced in September 2005, there is only 1 minute between the scheduled arrival of the train from Newcastle and the departure of the train on the Airport Link line. If the Airport Link train is running a few minutes late, I can catch it and be in the office at 8.30 a.m. If not, I have to sit on Central station for 10 minutes. For me, this is time wasted—time which could be better used to generate income or to extend my lunch break.

We have seen a widely reported decline in the service provided by CityRail, a decline that is unacceptable. A simple example of that decline is the change in travel time from Newcastle to Sydney. If my memory serves me correctly, when I was a child, the express train between Newcastle and Sydney—the Newcastle Flier—took about 2 hours and the train was hauled by a C36 or C38 steam locomotive. While many more people are carried on today's technically more advanced trains, the journey takes 35 minutes longer.

CityRail's obligation to its customers

I believe that CityRail should have some sort of contract with its customers. I have no doubt that the organisation's 'all care but no responsibility' position is support by legislation and regulation but it must change.

It is time CityRail was compelled to accept that it has a contract to deliver their customers to their destination as close to the scheduled timetable as possible and that there should be some penalty when the organisation fails to deliver that service.

I suggest that, if CityRail is granted a fare increase as a result of this application, a payment of $1 per minute should be introduced to compensate commuters when trains run late.

G G Goodworth

CityRail's Key arguments

CityRail says:

'This submission will provide evidence to demonstrate that an increase in CityRail fares is warranted due to:

- expenditure on capital improvements
- declining levels of cost recovery
- costs increasing at a rate greater than inflation, reflecting market conditions
- improvements in safety, reliability, passenger security, service quality and operational efficiency.'

There may some justification for a fare increase based on the first three points but, certainly not on the fourth.

Safety, reliability, passenger security and service quality at least on the lines that I use, leave much to be desired and the problems stem from poor work practices and poor maintenance.

CityRail says in 2.5 Inflation:

'Since 2003, CityRail's costs have been increasing at an average of 1% more than the equivalent increase in the consumer price index (CPI). This has been caused by wage growth which is in excess of CPI, maintenance costs, and significant increases in the price of commodities. Despite the 2.9% fare increase granted by IPART in 2006, a fare increase of about 12% would be required to compensate for the effects of inflation on CityRail for the period 2003/04 to 2006/07.'

CityRail had a history of poor investment in infrastructure and maintenance from the mid to late nineties to the present and having held network together with chewing gum and pieces of string for so long, it should not be the passengers' responsibility to pay extra for a sub-standard service before the service improves.

Most of CityRail's problems stem from poor maintenance. This is not an issue that long-suffering customers should have to pay to fix.

To give you some idea of the issues, the following incidents have occurred since the beginning of April this year.

Reliability

Doors

CityRail says in 3.3 Reliability

'Sectorisation of the CityRail network, the introduction of new timetables, a successful door motor replacement program and a reduction in the number of delays due to infrastructure incidents has improved service reliability.'

CityRail places great importance on its door motor replacement program.

It is a great pity that this program does not extend to the doors on the V set carriages in service on the inter-urban routes. Door failures are a regular event on these trains. Sometimes it is just one door that will not unlock or that both doors will not open fully. This results in a minor inconvenience having to squeeze through a space less than the full doorway. On other occasions, the doors fail to unlock and on one occasion recently, the guard let the train go from Warnervale before all passengers had negotiated the two sets of steps in the double deck carriage to reach the doors at the other end of the carriage. At night, the next train southbound involves a 40 minutes wait. There are few less hospitable places on a cold winter night than Wyee railway station!

I believe that there is a fundamental flaw in the procedure used by guards to ensure that all passengers have been able to get off the train.

Getting up and down the steps in these double-decker carriages, even in the four seat wide V Set carriages is not easy and running to get to the other doors is just plain dangerous. Somebody will be hurt one day.

On four occasions since the beginning of May, the 5.26 a.m. train from Newcastle has arrived at Warnervale 10 minutes late with the doors to two carriages locked off—we have to assume that it was because of faulty doors but the customers are never told anything. On each occasion, the train was rescheduled to the significant disadvantage of the regular travellers on two separate trains.

Each time the 5.26 a.m. from Newcastle was late with carriages locked, it arrived at Gosford still about 10 minutes late—7.11 a.m. but the 7.07 a.m. train that originates at Gosford and stops at all stations to Berowra is cancelled and the late-running train from Newcastle rescheduled to stop at all those stations.

This is the standard procedure for CityRail and it results in passengers arriving anything from 20 minutes to 35 minutes later than they should and it happens every time there is a problem. It is not good enough.

On one of these recent occasions, the Newcastle train arrived at Gosford and sat. Although pure guesswork, we might assume that the delay was so that the faults in the two locked carriages were rectified. However, customers were told nothing until after two other trains had left Gosford bound for Sydney.

On Thursday 19 July, the 5.26 a.m. train from Newcastle cancelled due to mechanical fault.

The 6.46 a.m. train from Wyong left on time with 2 extra stops added between Wyong and Gosford to compensate for the cancelled train. This should have added 2 minutes to the travel time—time that should have been easy for an enterprising driver to make up in a journey of over 100 km—but the train arrived at Central 25 minutes late, 40 minutes after cancelled train should have arrived. Two hours and fifteen minutes on a T set Tangara seat, unable to move is cruel and unusual punishment.

It would have been quicker and much more comfortable to wait for the next express train from Newcastle that left Newcastle a full 53 minutes later than the cancelled one!

Lack of emergency planning

The derailment at Wondabyne on the evening of 8 June suggests to me that CityRail has little in the way of workable emergency procedures. Clearly, CityRail cannot be held responsible for a derailment caused by a rock fall, but they should expect such incidents given the number of tunnels and cuttings that trains run through. The emergency plans that should be in place should not leave customers sitting without information of any sort for one and a half hours as happened with that derailment. And then when those in charge finally made decisions, they kept changing. The driver and the guard did a great job in difficult circumstances that night but even they were at their wit's end and the tone and nature of their comments clearly showed their frustration.

Communication

I also believe that CityRail is derelict in its customer care to not have a means whereby passengers can communicate with the train crew in an emergency.

Communication with the customer seems to be a complete anathema to CityRail. Guards make announcements that are intended to inform customers of what is going on. Often the speakers in the carriages are faulty or the guard is a person that speaks something that

at best resembles English. I am not criticising guards for whom English is their second language. There are plenty of guards with broad Ocker accents who speak so fast and clip their words so much that they are just as incomprehensible.

If I remember correctly, there were emergency communication points in the early second generation—stainless steel—trains. There is no means of communication with the train crew available on any of these trains, C, K, L, R and S sets today. Similarly, there is no emergency communication on the V set trains. Despite their age and likely phase out in a few years time, emergency communications on these trains should be a priority

Poor customer focus

The customer

I do not believe that CityRail management has the faintest notion of the concept of a customer or customer service and this attitude permeates the entire organisation right to the operational people running the trains.

I believe that is the mindset throughout CityRail is 'the public'. How much easier would life be without customers making a nuisance of themselves?

But customers they are. They buy tickets and expect a service.

I buy a ticket and I expect a train to get me to my destination safely, in some level of comfort and in a reasonable time frame.

I believe that the following few examples demonstrate quite graphically that the CityRail focus is still to keep the trains running as close to time table as possible without any consideration for the needs of the customer.

Guards at Central

On one occasion recently, the 8.23 a.m. train from Central to East Hills arrived at Central 3 minutes late but it sat for another 3 minutes waiting for the change-over guard who could not be bothered being on the platform to commence his shift on time. His reply when the platform supervisor complained that he was late, 'Keep your shirt on, I'm only 30 seconds late!' The train was actually 6 minutes late. A very poor attitude!

On another recent occasion, I arrived on the platform just as the doors of the train were closing. Ten seconds and I could have caught the train—and it was held with the doors closed for long enough for me to limp the length of two carriages with an injured ankle!

Guard at St James

On one occasion about two months ago, I rushed down the stairs at St James station to catch an Airport Link train and, despite the fact that the guard could see me and a young woman coming down the stairs, he shut the doors when we were less than a metre from the train. I looked up and saw the guard laughing! I can assure that I was not laughing when the following train, which should have been 6 minutes away, turned up 14 minutes later. The first train in this incident was on time and it would have taken 10 seconds to allow not one, but two passengers onto the train but No. And the guard thought it funny!

Tickets

Return tickets should not be restricted to the day of issue—particularly for customers outside Sydney. It used to be the case that a return ticket purchased in the afternoon one day could be used for a return journey the following day. A similar philosophy applies to Weekly tickets where tickets purchased after 3.30 p.m. can be used that night and the subsequent seven days.

Conclusion

It is time that this organisation was made to perform. There is plenty of evidence to prove that many of the problems experienced by CityRail customers are the result of poor maintenance policies and procedures. When some rail maintenance was in the hands of private contractors, RailCorp was most insistent on those organisations implementing ISO 9001-compliant operating systems and using them. It is time to apply the same standards to CityRail.

If you agree to grant CityRail the fare increase sought, it is time the organisation was placed on some sort of performance incentive.

While it may require some regulatory or legislative change, I recommend that when a train arrives at its destination late, CityRail should provide all passengers with a discount voucher equal to $1 per minute that the train is late to be used for their next ticket purchase.