IPART submission - Review of NSW CityRail fares for 2007/08

29 June 2007

The following submission regards Rail Corporation New South Wales ("RailCorp")'s submission ("the submission") to the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) in June 2007 and the IPART request for stakeholder submissions, "Review of NSW CityRail fares for 2007/08".

As a train user, I address one of the submission's key arguments to demonstrate, with evidence, that an increase in CityRail fares is not warranted due to the degradation of the train service, communication and information, security, stations and carriages and offsite services since the last fare rise on 1 July 2006.

The submission made significant reference to the "ITSRR survey in 2006"; however, it failed to recognise the services provided by CityRail where expectations were regarded by train users as having not been met.

Train service

The survey showed that delays and cancellations were the 5th lowest quality but 12th most important service as rated by 38% of train users. In fact, compared to 2005, 21% more train users found the delays and cancellations of train services to be worse than expected. Furthermore, punctuality (26%), the frequency of trains (13%) and journey times (6%) were all rated significantly worse than expected.

Communication and information

The survey showed that the clarity of announcements on trains were the 4th lowest quality but 14th most important service as rated by 44% of train users. Furthermore, information provided at the station about arrival and departure times, the quality of information provided about train delays and cancellations and the timeliness of announcements about delays and cancellations were all rated worse than expected by between 9% and 12% more train users than in 2005.

Security

The survey showed that staff visibility on platforms in the evenings was the 3rd lowest quality but 15th most important service, as rated by 44% of train users. In fact, 6% more train users found that the visibility of CityRail staff on the platform in the evenings was significantly worse than expected compared to 2005.

Stations and carriages

The survey showed that crowding in trains at peak commuter times was the lowest quality service as rated by the majority of train users. It was also rated as important or very important by 82% of train users. Furthermore, the knowledge and helpfulness of CityRail staff and comfort of the temperature in carriages were both rated worse than expected by between 3% and 5% more train users compared to 2005.

Offsite services

The survey showed that availability of secure car parking was the 2nd lowest quality service as rated by 42% of train users. It was also rated as important or very important by 61% of train users. The survey report states that "With the improvements in other aspects of service, the availability of secure car parking has therefore moved higher up in the ranking of aspects of service not meeting customer expectations."

Impact of fare rise

"CityRail fares increased on 1 July 2006. This date was during the interviewing period for the survey. To assess whether the fare rise had an impact on train users' perceptions of value for money, respondents were split into two groups: those who were interviewed before the price rise and those were interviewed after the price rise. There was no difference between the two groups in their perceptions of value for money..."

While the submission claims that "44% of our customers rated the cost of train travel as either good or great value for money", this clearly means that the majority of customers (56%) rated the cost of train travel as anywhere from "OK" (not necessarily "acceptable" as per all other quality ratings) to "very poor value for money".

Personal impact

Having changed from mainly using off-peak services in 2006 to always using peak services in 2007, I have noticed a sharp increase in the number of delays and cancellations of the services I use – an experience validated by the 2006 survey. There are no secure car parking facilities available at my railway station and I experience overcrowding every morning and afternoon both on the platform and in the carriage.

On one occasion, the train I was on was delayed due to a driver not appearing for duty. This information was not communicated to the passengers at the time and after an unacceptable delay, passengers were advised to change trains. However, upon boarding the alternative train, the whistle was blown and the doors were literally closed in the faces of passengers attempting to board. I was one of those passengers.

The future

The submission makes reference to "'future' strategies" as an argument for CityRail fares to be increased. If any of these strategies are to affect IPART's decision, I recommend that IPART decline RailCorp's proposal until those strategies are implemented - especially with regards to linking "CityRail Board and senior management remuneration to on-time running and an independent measure of customer satisfaction."

Conclusion

The last decision made by IPART on this matter was largely based on "a significant portion of the increase in CityRail's costs … due to initiatives to improve its performance". However, the cost of train travel is satisfactory at best while there is no longer evidence to show that these initiatives have resulted in an increase in the quality and reliability of its passenger services. "Crowding, car parking, and delays and cancellations were all in the list of the five most poorly delivered aspects of service in both 2004 and 2005", and this has not changed since the last fare increase.

I therefore reject RailCorp's key argument regarding improvements in service quality.

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