Older Women's Network

3 August, 2007

Attention Allan Miles
Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal of NSW (IPART)
Re: Review of City Rail Fares

Dear Mr Miles,
You have requested a response from the Older Women's Network NSW on IPART's proposal to increase fares based on four assumptions. Whilst there is no mention in your correspondence of any change to the existing Pensioner Excursion Ticket, which the majority of our members use, we are concerned that any increase may have a flow on effect to the cost of this ticket.
In addition, as our membership can cover any woman who identifies as 'older' - we have members ranging in age from 45 to 100 years. Naturally our 'younger older women' are still in the workforce, and often raise the cost and unreliability and overcrowding of public transport as serious issues. Given that this particular review is focusing on train fares, I'd like to address each of the assumptions and how they relate to our members concerns.

IPART Assumption I:
Services have improved
We await improvements in the following areas:
Availability – this includes the frequency of services to outer areas of Sydney. We have groups, some located in Blacktown, Wollondilly, Illawarra, Macarthur, Parramatta, Chatswood, Penrith, Woy Woy and Wyong who have all raised issues with availability. When services are available they are often overcrowded and despite allocated priority seating, members frequently are put in the position of having to remind other commuters of the purpose of this innovation.
Where are the comparative statistics to demonstrate an improvement in availability? Is it in restricted areas? At certain times?

Reliability – Is it unreasonable to expect that services run within a reasonable approximation of the published timetable? Is it unreasonable to expect that services stop at the stations posted on the indicator? Is it unreasonable to expect that the information on indicator boards and train announcements correspond? Is it unreasonable to expect that train announcements would exist on all services to allow for safe travel of the visually impaired?
Where are the comparative statistics to demonstrate an improvement in reliability? Is it in restricted areas? At certain times?

Safety – this issue is related to availability and reliability, because no one wants to be left standing on the platform, exposed to the elements, and because overcrowded services substantially increase the risk of falls for women, and when combined with the increasing risk of osteoporosis as women age, the outcome can be disastrous, leading to severe disability and in extreme cases contributing to death. The gap between trains and the platform also continues to present problems for women with mobility

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problems, just as it does women with children, and many grandmothers are now having to negotiate this gap as carers of grandchildren, with toddlers and or children in prams.
Where are the comparative statistics to demonstrate an improvement in safety? Is it in restricted areas? At certain times?
As users of these services our only evidence is our experience which do not yet support the assertion that 'services have improved'.

IPART Assumption II:
More money is needed to continue operational and capital improvements
Naturally more money needs to be spent to improve the system. We don't question this. This is in fact why we spend a lifetime paying taxes and employing governments to responsibly spend our money on maintaining vital public infrastructure.

IPART Assumption III:
Passengers should bear more (and taxpayers less) of the cost
Passengers are taxpayers. If they are pensioners, they're retired taxpayers, if they're children, then their guardians are taxpayers – although both these groups still actively pay GST! Who is this population of implied 'free loading' passengers? Although the research would appear scant, the numbers of non-taxpayers – perhaps dodgy music promoters, former test cricket captains or illegal immigrants - burdening our public transport system appears minimal. (I suspect they're more likely to drive expensive imported cars!) So this justification is a simply a very tired, and meaningless defense from the dusty tome of economic rationalism.
The fact is that encouraging the use of public transport should form part of our environmental plan to reduce society's dependence on private motor vehicles. Government must take responsibility for encouraging a switch to public transport, by improving it, and by making it a viable economic alternative for individuals and families. The concept of 'bearing the cost' has environmental impacts, and a role to play in changing human behavior. We employ governments and their statutory bodies to take responsible long-term environmental and economic decisions.

IPART Assumption IV:
Passengers can afford the increase
Which passengers? How has IPART determined this?
Women on full pensioners, or fixed retirement incomes are struggling with rising costs in public transport, food, utilities and health care. These costs are rising at a higher rate than the old age pension, which is linked to an aggregate CPI and based on 25% of average male weekly earnings.

Gavin Dufty from St Vincent de Paul research has shown that for pensioners renting in the private rental market and using public transport, the cost of living has gone up at a rate 30 % higher than inflation, whereas the real value of the pension has actually declined over the past ten years. Added to this is the gender disparity in superannuation savings, with many older women having little or no super, they face decades of living below the poverty line.

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The increasing cost of crude oil has pushed up the price of essentials, and added considerably to the cost of food and services. This impost increases for women living in rural or remote areas. Older women rely heavily on public transport. Many cannot afford to maintain a vehicle, and use the public transport system to remain socially connected. Transportation is necessary to attend medical appointments and with our increasing life expectancy, we are finding that although living longer, women tend to need health and pharmaceutical services to a greater extent. Pharmaceutical costs have increased by more than twice the inflation or CPI rate since 1990.

Dental care its cost, lack of a government rebate, and long waiting periods for public dental treatment impacts on the financial and health priorities for many older women. Women go without dentures, without pharmaceuticals, without nutritious food, simply because their pensions do not extend that far. The cost of household utilities has risen, and is set to rise further. With limited, or non-existent savings, coping with unexpected cost like repairs, replacement of household items, can precipitate a financial crisis. Some women have resorted to equity mortgages simply to maintain a basic standard of living.

Of course this option is not available to women living in rental accommodation. They struggle to find affordable housing and have experienced exponential increases in costs over the last 5 years. They simply not afford to be relocated from the community services that sustain them, or to pay significantly more to maintain this connection if they are forced to move away and travel further.

Our organisation is staffed, as are many other community organisations, by older women. Their ability to travel economically and continue to contribute and participate in their community is a vital part of Australia's social capital. Many community oragnisations would cease to function if their volunteers were unable to afford to participate. OWN offsets this travel cost to the individual by a volunteers fare reimbursement, however we must undertake to raise these funds another way, any increase putting further pressure on our community organisation.

Maintaining our rights, dignity and wellbeing requires the support of an equitable, accessible, and affordable society with the public transport system worthy of the women and men who built it.

We trust IPART will take these matters into consideration.

Beth Eldridge
Coordinator OWN NSW

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