

Next month concludes a year at the PTC's helm for chief executive Ian Dobbs. PETER MICKELBROUGH talks with him

Pennies before patrons

AFTER a year in the driver's seat of economic reform in the debt-stricken Public Transport Corporation, Ian Dobbs offers no apology for putting finances before patrons.

The man imported from Britain by Transport Minister Alan Brown to implement his radical program says he understands Victorians' impatience to see better services, but he has had to temper expectations against the need to place the system on a solid footing.

"It is almost a balancing act between the taxpayer and the customer ... (but) I make no excuse for the fact that the overriding priority in year one was on one part of the equation because if we had not tackled that first we would have lost a considerable amount of the system," said Mr Dobbs, 39.

"The good thing is we've got a win under our belt now, and the fact we're beating our financial targets means the guys in here have got the confidence to tackle service delivery."

Mr Dobbs dismisses the suggestion falling patronage has been a major failing of his first year at the controls.

He says the exodus is not surprising given the state of the economy.

"Patronage in Melbourne



Ian Dobbs: the turnaround in the transport system's fortunes has attracted overseas interest. Picture: MATT BOUWMEESTER

dropped less than in all other Australian cities last year, with the exception of Perth which built a new railway, so let's not get too despondent."

By contrast, Mr Dobbs claims the PTC's financial shakeout has been an incredible success, with the corpora-

tion already ahead of its \$100 million savings target for the current financial year.

The massive amount represents more than a third of the \$245 million in annual savings Mr Brown wants achieved by June 1996.

Mr Dobbs says impressive efficiency gains, achieved largely by the axing of about 7000 jobs and the sale of some rolling stock, are not only sustainable but can be improved upon.

Touted as the biggest 12-month turnaround in any substantial world transport system, Mr Dobbs says it has attracted international attention, with several requests from overseas operators for PTC presentations.

"I think we've come further in 12 months than we even dared hope," he said. "But it's not just the dollar signs, it's what's happening within the organisation."

A 2 per cent reduction in hours lost through what has been a chronic absenteeism problem is, Mr Dobbs sug-

gests, proof of a new work culture emerging within the PTC.

Twelve-month contracts offering both bonuses and uncertain futures to the PTC's 80 senior managers have also helped staff focus on their tasks.

'ALL of it's big stick and carrot ... but I think it's true to say that most of it's been achieved by the carrot," he said.

"It's only recently that these guys have had really definitive targets to head for and until someone tells you what's expected of you, how in the hell can you expect delivery?"

But with targets now in place, Mr Dobbs is demanding delivery in the next 12 months as he shifts the focus from finances to service quality.

"Anybody can slash and burn ... the key is making sure the changes are planned and happen in a systematic

place, stump the building if you like, to get it ready to build a structure on top of."

Mr Dobbs hopes commuters will give him a further 12 months to build before judging the success of his efforts.

Grappling with Melburnians' love-hate obsession with their public transport has provided an unexpected challenge for Mr Dobbs.

"I was surprised at the level of interest that public transport generated in the press and people's minds.

"They do hold public transport far dearer here than in most other Australian states or internationally."

DESPITE the daunting challenges of automated ticketing and driver-only operations, Mr Dobbs confidently predicts the year ahead will prove a turning point in public attitudes.

"The next year — to June 1995 — is the year that quality will begin to turnaround and patronage at least stabilise."

And while Victorians continue to wait, perhaps they can take some small comfort in knowing Mr Dobbs' commitment to succeed leaves him victim to the same anxious clock watching that has become synonymous with patrons of public transport in Victoria.

Seated in his 15th floor Transport House office, overlooking the railway lines between Flinders St and Spencer St stations, Mr Dobbs confides to feeling more than a little worried when he looks down and cannot see a train in sight.

"I am a train operator by experience and when I look out there and nothing moves for a few minutes in the rush hour, any railway man would be nervous."

PETER MICKELBROUGH is the Herald Sun's transport reporter.

EFFICIENCY GAINS UNDER IAN DOBBS

