

Fare Systems for Melbourne - a response.

This is the time where I don my "devil's advocate" and "luddite" caps, I'm afraid. I agree with David's introductory comments about the need for new ways of funding public transport, and support his suggestions in this area. However, I have problems with the ticketing system proposed:

1. Why change? Of course the "scratch tickets" must go, but what's wrong with the system we had before? It seems to have been popular, and was one of the easiest and most convenient in the world. Changing again will confuse people, especially the elderly and disabled, and should only be done for compelling reasons.

The zonal system certainly contains anomalies, but most can be resolved without dramatic change. I don't think we need be embarrassed at having nothing more "imaginative" to offer than an improved version of a popular system.

2. Credit cards. The majority of people in the community do not have credit cards and some cantankerous souls (like me) are opposed to them. The "debit card" suggested for those without credit cards creates a similar problem to "MetTicket", by requiring payment of fares in advance as a lump sum. People without credit cards tend to have low incomes and would be unable to afford this.

3. Per kilometre fares. Although justice requires that fares be roughly proportional to distance travelled, there are good reasons for exceptions to this principle, e.g:

- some areas (Melton, Sunbury) get reductions to compensate for inferior service; and inner suburban residents should probably pay more per km;
- some public transport routes are indirect: Eltham and Mitcham are both 20 km from the GPO as the crow flies, but the rail trips are 26.5 and 21.5 km respectively. Elthamites shouldn't pay 23% more, but they would if charged per km.;
- regular users of the system should get discounts, to reward them for making a commitment to public transport: a simple over 500km discount would only help those living in outer suburbs.

4. It won't save money. The idea that staff need to be freed from ticket selling duties to serve the public is debatable: at present, many station staff and tram conductors provide wonderful service: the important thing seems to be employee attitude and training.

The anticipated additional revenue depends on the validity of the assumption that the new system would attract extra patrons.

5. High costs. The scheme would be expensive to introduce and operate. Something like 8,000 ticket issuing machines (@ two per vehicle door) would have to be purchased, installed, maintained, and serviced daily. Also envisaged are vehicle address systems and electronic alarms activated by tickets being cancelled. Presumably, some sort of sensor would need to be attached to each ticketing machine, to enable it to tell what station or stop it is at. The public transport system is virtually bankrupt: scarce resources should be used for projects that will unquestionably bring benefits.

6. Fare evasion. The system offers increased potential for fare evasion: the easiest method would be not to insert one's credit card in the train ticketing machine unless one saw a guard or inspector coming. With one guard and up to 1000 passengers per 6-car train, the rate of inspection would be low. Even two guards is still one to 500 passengers.

7. Boarding delays. Each passenger would have to insert credit card in machine, punch in "PIN" number (and possibly type of ticket required), collect a ticket and cancel same at the end of the trip. Imagine 100 passengers boarding a tram in peak hour (50 per door), while another 100 alight. It would be like trams with seated conductors, only worse.

The basic problem lies in creating a source of congestion around vehicle doorways. Efficient operation requires that nothing should stop passengers moving speedily into and out of vehicles.

8. Data collection. The system would certainly allow more efficient data collection, but the efficiency may be too great. The Met would have the facility to track every individual's daily and weekly movements, which might not impress civil libertarians (including myself).

I wonder whether we need to go to so much trouble to get data anyway. I recently read in "The Age" about Hobart spending millions of dollars on a computer-linked ticketing system that told them which buses were crowded and which were empty. This is important information, but I don't see why they couldn't have obtained it at no cost simply by talking to their bus drivers!

9. Would patronage really increase? It is suggested that there would be a shift to public transport, because higher per-km fares currently discourage inner suburban residents from using public transport. Census figures show that inner area residents currently use public transport at twice the rate of outer residents despite higher per-km fares. Would charging them less and outer area patrons more really attract a net increase in patronage?

10. No barriers at stations. There certainly would be advantages in removing ticket barriers at stations. However, this can be done with the pre-MetTicket system, by replacing barrier ticket checking with on-vehicle checks, as has occurred in Toronto.

However, the reason barriers were removed in Toronto was to speed passengers entry and exit, and improve convenience, by allowing monthly and yearly ticket holders to move freely on and off the system.

Requiring patrons to deal with ticket machines twice on each vehicle boarded seems to conflict with this aim.

11. Is it politically wise? The public transport system faces many problems, and a lot of work will be needed to solve them. I feel that the PTUA and the Met would spend their time more productively addressing the major problems. I am also concerned that advocating any sort of automated ticketing system plays into the hands of our opponents, who still want to remove tram conductors and station staff from the system.

Although the proposal does not logically require the removal of these staff, the fact is that some Met planners will seize on any excuse to do so. It might be wisest not to give them such an excuse.

In Melbourne, the taxpayer pays 65% of public transport operating costs; in Toronto, it's only 25%. Yet, in Toronto, people still buy tickets from staff at railway stations, bus drivers and (I'm told) tram conductors. Perhaps we need to look harder to see what Toronto is doing right to get such good figures!

An alternative.

At the April PTUA General Meeting, members seemed to clearly support a return to a ticketing system based on the pre-MetTicket concept, but with the ability to buy periodical tickets at places like newsagents. They also wanted conductors on all or most trams, and "first to last" train staffing of stations.

The pre-MetTicket zonal system did contain imperfections, and the current review provides a venue to fix them up. I suggest we look at:

(a) Periodical tickets. Two thirds of Met patrons are regular commuters, and should not be buying daily tickets at all. A full range of long term periodicals must be introduced, and the prices reduced to make them attractive to regular users. "Date to date" tickets, used successfully by V/Line, should be looked at.

They could certainly be sold at places like Newsagents, for greater convenience. Refunds should be made easier. Greater use of periodicals speeds up buses, and enables staff reductions at busy stations, which currently have two or more ticket sellers.

Periodical tickets should be promoted vigorously, for example through schemes like that which operates successfully in the State Public Service, which allows yearlies to be paid off in instalments by weekly salary deductions.

Use of periodicals gives the PTC the advantage of receiving revenue in advance, enabling it to be invested to earn interest, or used to avoid short term borrowings. Periodicals also cut fare evasion: once you buy the ticket, you can't avoid fares for the period the ticket is current.

(b) Fare zone revision. The current zones contain anomalies, but the concept is sound and popular. The large fare rise between zones 1 and 2 means going one station further can double the fare. One might also ask why stations like Rosanna & Box Hill (15 km from city) are in Zone 2, while Huntingdale(17.5) and Laverton (20) are in Zone 1. We also need a full system of off-peak tickets. A solution is to replace the current three zones with four, with boundaries at 5, 15 and 25 km from the GPO. Adult fares could be:

	Single (3 hr)	All day	Off peak
Any one zone	\$1	\$2	\$1.20
Two zones	1.60	3	2
Three..	2.50	4.50	3
Anywhere	3.20	6.00	4

This would enable the abolition of tickets like the "short trip" and "rail only" weeklies. Overall, it could be accommodated without increasing the number of ticket types available before MetTicket.

(c) Fare rises should be annual, preferably on a fixed date, and small, (below CPI) to lessen the "shock". This would provide further incentive to buy long term tickets, e.g. a yearly just before the fare rise date.

Free public transport for all is not an option favoured by PTUA members.

(d) Staffing. Every station should be staffed from first train to last, for safety and service. However, some stations that currently have more than one staff member might get reductions. With just over 200 stations, I can't see why this should require more than 1100 staff. There are currently 1400 station staff, so it seems they could be deployed more effectively. There is a role for ticket vending machines, e.g. on the unattended side of stations with two platforms. Video cameras can also help staff observe stations, but cannot replace them.

Tram conductors should be retained, and reintroduced on the few services from which they have been removed. "Driver only" trams, operated in the same way as buses, could be considered for services with very low patronage, and where safety is not a problem. An example is the CBD LaTrobe Street shuttle. The "scratch tickets" should be abolished.

Both tram conductors and rail station staff should take on additional duties, including passenger information and ensuring the cleanliness of stations and vehicles.

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