

Submission To Ministerial Inquiry into Public Transport

Prepared by Eco Transit Sydney

14th May 2007

**Submission to the
Special Commission of Inquiry into Sydney Ferries**

Prepared by: Eco Transit Sydney

Date: 14th May 2007

Authorised by the Executive Committee of Eco Transit Sydney

Submission consists of:

10 page response to several of the terms of reference

Please contact the delegated contact for
Eco Transit Sydney
if all components of the submission as outlined above
have not been received.

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See our website at: www.ecotransit.org.au

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The Secretary
Special Commission of Inquiry into Sydney Ferries
PO Box K1026
HAYMARKET NSW 1240

Dear Madam or Sir,

To Whom It May Concern:,

Please accept this submission from EcoTransit Sydney regarding the Special Inquiry into Sydney Ferries.

This submission was prepared and submitted on behalf of the sustainable transport advocacy group, EcoTransit Sydney in response to the call for public comment regarding the operations of Sydney Ferries.

EcoTransit Sydney is a public transport advocacy group operating out of Sydney. We are a not for profit organisation dedicated to the promotion of EcoTransit development.

We trust that you will give consideration to our concerns.

Yrs,

Leah Mason
Committee Member
EcoTransit Sydney

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Introduction to Eco Transit and Eco Transit Sydney

What is Eco Transit?

EcoTransit is transport that supports a sustainable economy and environment. The transport sector is a major part of our economy, both in terms of investment and costs but also in terms of its contribution to emerging concerns with emissions and particulate matter. Recognising the value of increased resource efficiency in this sector allows for a more comprehensive understanding of efficiency in our economy more generally. Public transport, walking and cycling are all forms of EcoTransit which increase the efficiency of our transport infrastructure and reduce the demands placed upon our health system.

What is Eco Transit Sydney?

EcoTransit Sydney is a public transport advocacy group operating out of Sydney. We are a not-for profit organisation dedicated to the promotion of EcoTransit development. We advocate improving Sydney's local environment by shifting transport from invasive modes like the private motor car that produce high levels of air, noise and water pollution, to less-polluting public transport modes. We are also dedicated to the preservation of Sydney's natural environment and heritage areas.

Overview

A safe and reliable public transport system must be assessed not just in terms of cost, but in terms of the benefits that come from its use. Ecotransit Sydney recognises that transport systems based on private vehicle use cost the community in its entirety, through lessened amenity, health issues associated with poor air/water quality and increasing rates of obesity related disease through car dependence. We believe that private and privately owned transport is incapable of adequately supporting the populations of cities like Sydney in a clean and efficient manner, and that the necessity of an effective mass transit system should be recognised by the allocation of resources. Regardless of whether such a system is delivered through government disbursement of public funds, or whether a franchise is extended to private companies, it is difficult to argue against the need to provide appropriate levels of safety, reliability and *availability*. It is our position that these are the criteria that must be considered when addressing questions of operational efficiency and costs.

Eco Transit Sydney would like to take this opportunity to advise against the proposal that private ownership would necessarily reduce so-called inefficiencies and deliver a better service. This has not been shown in other areas of Sydney's transport system and it is unlikely that the operation of ferries would be more profitable than the operation of bus routes, where the NSW government contribute significantly to the running costs of a private business. The public

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continues to pay for these services through purchase, maintenance and stabling of vehicles.

It is also important to recognise that allowing essential infrastructure to become subject to market interests puts access to such infrastructure beyond the reach of many members of the community.

For these and many other reasons, it is our understanding that responsible infrastructure design should not be based on narrow evaluations of short term costs. It is our view that it is duty of government to lead in the direction that will achieve good social, health and economic indicators, Efficient, reliable and sustainable public transport can deliver this outcome. Given the above, and in the light of concerns about the standard of service being provided currently by Sydney Ferries, Eco Transit Sydney submits the following recommendations in response to the terms of the enquiry.

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Response to the Terms of Reference

General

While EcoTransit Sydney is concerned that Sydney Ferries does not offer the ideal service, it does not present as an organisation in crisis, as would seem to be the case with City Rail, nor do Sydney Ferries customers appear to have the ongoing dissatisfaction demonstrated by patrons of Sydney's overcrowded bus and train services.

EcoTransit is very concerned that the current interest in Sydney Ferries is being generated by the desire to sell off this service. Numerous comments over the last several years have indicated that the NSW government would like to rid itself of what it appears to feel is a financial "burden". The ferry services may seem to be a soft target for rationalising government funded public transport, due to the socio-economic status of its passenger base, however it is important to recognise that ferry services are enjoyed by tourists, pensioners, and the many lower income residents of various water-based suburbs.

Other questions regarding the efficiency of the Sydney Ferries operation have sparked debate regarding work practices. EcoTransit Sydney believes that it is important to remember that ferries are not just any kind of vehicle – they are large boats carrying very large numbers of people with a skeleton crew. In terms of staffing per passenger, ferries represent much better value than buses, and contribute significantly to reducing congestion on Sydney's road network.

There needs to be an acknowledgement that Ferries provide a particular kind of service and have a particular place in the transport mix of Sydney's daily operations. To treat this as something that could be substituted by another form of transport is problematic. Ferries take many people off the roads – regardless of whether they are taking their car, taking a bus or if possible taking the train – this is a benefit in the current climate of congestion and the absence of capacity in all other forms of transport. Unless we are considering a helicopter service it is difficult to see how any reduction in the availability of this form of transport would contribute to the overall performance of the transport system.

We would like to take this opportunity to advocate against the privatisation of ferry services, as it is clear that a private operator would need to dramatically alter the services level of safety, frequency and or coverage to turn a profit. We do not feel that any reduction in safety, frequency or coverage is justified, although we have many suggestions as to how these may be increased.

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Changes to operations

Staffing appears to be the main subject of conversation when changes to operations are being considered, however it is not clear that reducing staff will improve the service. Rather it seems more likely to result in lessened safety in an emergency. EcoTransit Sydney would argue that safety, fares and availability should not be sacrificed in the name of cutting costs. Reduction of staffing levels should only take place with the meaningful involvement of those whose safety and comfort are likely to be placed at risk by cuts to staffing levels.

EcoTransit Sydney would like to raise other operational issues that may significantly impact upon the discussion of staffing., Rising fuelling costs and greenhouse reduction strategies are going necessitate changes to the Sydney Ferries fleet composition before much longer, and in all likelihood this will create a very different environment for making decisions about the viability of the service. We would like to raise the possibility that the Sydney Ferries of the near future will be smaller, more numerous, and powered by solar and/or wind.

Changes to industrial practices

There has been much discussion of the impact of union inspired 'fat' in the staffing system. We believe that this discussion cannot be had without reference to occupational and passenger health and safety. Additionally, if this conversation is to be had, it would be advisable to engage the travelling public in a very direct way - it is their safety that is being considered after all.

Any changes to industrial practices that put passenger safety at risk in the event of an accident should be put to the public in a meaningful way, such that the resulting decisions are informed by this input. Changes are far more likely to be accepted if passengers and staff have had a meaningful discussion of the issues and consequences.

This kind of approach may also have benefits in the event of the inevitable accident or emergency. Issues of adequate staffing will have been answered and any investigation will focus squarely on the circumstances rather than the failure of Sydney Ferries to provide adequately for such an event. If given a say, the outcomes will reflect the publics own sense of what is due to the protection of their safety.

The inquiry should call for all management records of incidents and the response to them. Without that, there can be no reasonable discussion of this issue.

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Measures to achieve cultural change

This term of reference assumes that there is a cultural problem that is sufficiently obvious that no further explanation is needed. While we are aware, as most public transport users are, that there are significant culture issues regarding the operations of City Rail, we are unaware of 'cultural' problems of the Sydney Ferries organisation.

If we were to become aware of a 'culture' problem, we would suggest that where such change is identified, the best outcomes are achieved through involving the organisation in the task of defining and resolving the problems. They are best placed to contribute detailed knowledge of the work that is performed.

In all events, EcoTransit Sydney believe that it is the safety cultures and service cultures that are of utmost importance in public transport. All other 'culture' issues should be secondary to safety and service, except as it pertains to them directly.

Changes in regulatory and governance arrangements

Sydney Ferries attracts approximately 50 million dollars in government subsidies each year, and produces no return for the investment – a statement that is used as a criticism of many public services but one whose foundation must be carefully examined.

One of the things the inquiry must consider in respect to subsidies or operating losses, are those elements that are often referred to as "externalities". What would be the costs associated with cutting services and driving up fares? It is most likely that there would be a shift to transport modes that are already at or beyond capacity.

Given the recent release of data that suggests road congestion is creating an 8 billion dollar loss of productivity in the Sydney Basin alone, it would seem that the current subsidy for the public ferry service is preventing further losses to business and to government.

If seeking other sources of subsidies, the inquiry should look to those businesses that profit from the ferry service. These would include businesses surrounding the Circular Quay end of the Sydney CBD at the very least. EcoTransit Sydney believe that useful information would result from an examination of the unaccounted external benefits flowing to the community and private business as a result of the service.

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Other matters

EcoTransit Sydney is concerned that there have been no moves to replace the Sydney Ferries fleet.

Finally, it seems incongruous to tie a broad ranging discussion of the operations of an entire service to the investigation of a particular incident. EcoTransit Sydney is somewhat uncomfortable with the restriction placed upon this Inquiry, and we are at a loss to understand why this has been imposed.