

Inquiry Name: Inquiry into Expanding Melbourne's Free Tram Zone

SUBMISSION

Dear Honourable Members,

My name is Ashwin Umakantha Sarma and I work as a junior doctor. I have been using Melbourne's public transport system for much of my life, having attended an inner-city high school and frequently visiting the city by public transport. I commend you for holding this inquiry, but I am afraid to say that I do not support the free tram zone at all, let alone any extension of the free tram zone.

As you know, the Free Tram Zone (FTZ) was a bi-partisan election promise made by the Liberal and Labor parties in the lead up to the 2014 Victorian state election. Despite being created with good intentions and being politically popular, the FTZ is a poor public policy which has many unintended but negative consequences on our tram network. It has resulted in an in-equitable situation where paying passengers are disadvantaged and further investment in improving the network stymied.

The introduction of the free tram zone has meant that trams in the Central Business District (CBD) are regularly overcrowded to the point where passengers cannot get on. The issue is particularly of importance for fare-paying passengers aiming to leave the CBD in peak times, beyond the free tram zone. They will often be unable to get into the particular tram they need to leave the CBD, because it is full of passengers travelling short distances in the free tram zone. This is an inequitable arrangement.

The reasons for trams to become full are various, and while it appears to be a good sign of adequate patronage of our transport system, there are various drawbacks to consider, which I will lay out below:

1. The free tram zone only benefits people who would have otherwise walked, cycled or caught taxis. Who are the people who are now taking advantage of travel within the free tram zone? Passengers who arrived in the city by train, bus or outside the free tram zone have already paid for their fare and are entitled to travel on tram services during the day with no extra cost. Those who have benefited from the free tram zone therefore are:
 - people who have arrived by car into the city
 - people who live in the city and would have otherwise walked or cycled through the city, or paid a fare to use the tram
 - people who would catch taxis for travel within the CBD - and it is likely they would easily be able to afford a tram fare given the high cost of taxis

Walking, cycling and active forms of transport should be encouraged as much as possible. The free provision of trams provides a great incentive for people to use it for short trips - I have seen this happen myself on multiple occasions, where many able-bodied people get on a tram just to travel for one stop.

In addition, if trams were limited to those that paid fares, the extra room would be much better utilised by those people who are less able or have a disability.

2. Free services attract a large number of passengers, leading to overcrowding. As mentioned earlier, this makes tram services unattractive and means passengers needing to travel longer distances are unable to board the trams that they are paying for, due to people taking advantage of the free service and only travelling short distances.

3. There is little incentive to improve a free public transport service that is being well patronised. This has been seen in other cities where free public transport has been instituted. In fact, the more people that use the free transport, and the more services instituted to deal with other crowding, the more and more money is lost. More services are put in place without any return in revenue. This eventually leads to a point where it is not sustainable, and there are insufficient funds to improve services. This then becomes a disincentive to make any improvements. The end result is an overcrowded and unsatisfactory experience for passengers. This is in comparison to a situation where increased fare recovery from well utilised services can be used to improve the transport network further and deal with demand.

Finally, I have had a chance to read some of the other submissions and hear various opinions on this subject. A recurring theme is the high cost of a short trip ticket. It costs \$4.40 for any journey that includes zone 1, whether it be 5-10 stops and taking 10 minutes, or is a trip from Pakenham to the City, which is a distance of roughly 50km and takes in excess of 1 hour. Many people, myself included, feel that the cost of a short trip on our transport network is excessive. If we had a more equitable fare structure, this would alleviate the cost burden for passengers who would like to make shorter trips on our public transport network. It would also make the cost of public transport more competitive compared to driving for short trips. There are various ways to implement this including having more zones, or a distance-based ticketing system, etc.- there are pros and cons to each of them but our current system is not ideal.

In addition, many international students find the cost of full adult fares difficult to pay. Another alternative to extending the free tram zone would be to give them access to concession fares - equal to domestic university students. This could help reduce the burden on those making their journeys within the CBD to educational institutions, without causing the problems we see with the free tram zone.

In summary, I believe that the free tram zone is inequitable and disadvantages fare paying and long-distance passengers, leads to overcrowding on trams, and discourages people from walking and cycling. For this reason, I believe the free tram should be abolished, or if it were to stay, that it should not be extended any further. In addition, there needs to be a review of our current fare structure in view of making it fairer and more equitable whilst being sustainable. There are better ways of helping the disadvantaged and infirm access tram services. I have based my opinion on my own observations as a passenger as well as my own reading around this topic. Data from the Charting Transport blog support these points. In addition, Daniel Bowen (past president of the Public Transport Users Association) also has expressed similar opinions on this issue.