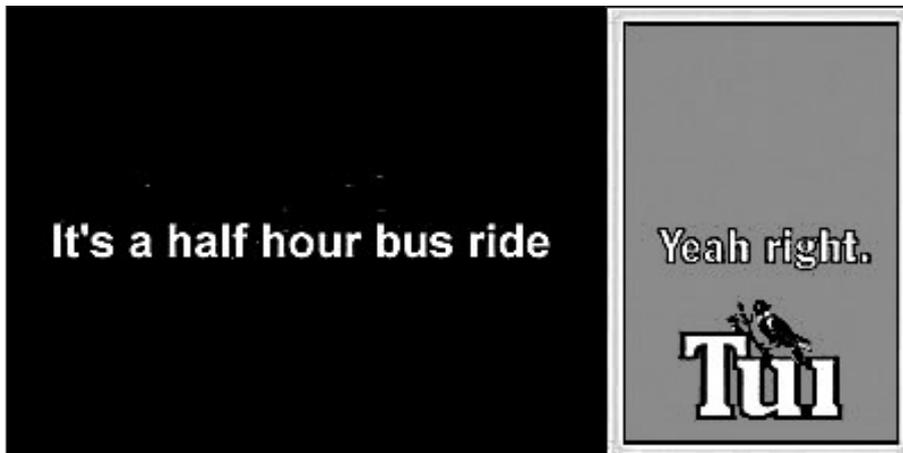


Stagecoach service isn't up to scratch

By Brad Heap



Not an authentic Tui advertisement

Buses: the backbone of Auckland's public transport system. Always reliable. Never late. Cheap fares. Comfortable, stress-free travel.

Oops, I must be dreaming again.

The reality is a different story. Stagecoach buses are constantly late, overcrowded, slow, and overpriced. The owners of Stagecoach must get a lot of enjoyment out of seeing their customers late for work, school and university.

I am a regular bus user. Monday to Friday I bus from Downtown to Massey.

In four weeks of bussing to and from Massey I have not once had a bus that has been on time. In four weeks the variation in arrival times has been between five minutes to over an hour late.

Is it acceptable for a company to treat passengers like this? It's a situation where you need to allow upwards of two hours traveling from Downtown to Massey (a car journey of 25 minutes).

What causes a bus to be late? Auckland's traffic is the first idea to come to mind. That idea is incorrect, because the bus timetables are set to account for this.

Overcrowded buses, due to infrequent service is the main cause of late buses. To put it simply, the timetable is set to allow for the bus to stop and pick up passengers. The current timetable is not set for the sheer number of passengers that are using Stagecoach buses. What this means is that because more people are catching buses, more people have

"Thanks for your feedback, good or bad some feedback is bettern(sic) than none at all. With regards to the change in fares, what we stated on the web site is as far as I am allowed to comment on.

With regards to improvements to current serbice(sic) reliability, I ahve(sic) passed this on to the people responsioble(sic) for their attention.

With regards to the future, please see info on the Busway, but also, there is to be a avstly(sic) improved service to the North SHore(sic) starting in July of this year."

- Russell Turnbull, Marketing Manager of Stagecoach New Zealand, responds to Brad Heap's concerns

to be served by the driver, which takes time. Now this slows the bus down and might make it a few minutes late. The issue of overcrowded buses becomes worse though, because with more people on the bus (and subsequently more people who will want to get off), the bus becomes later. Because the bus is running late, there will be more people at the bus stops (because there will be people arriving to catch the next bus), and even more people on the late bus.

Solving the problem of overcrowded buses is easy. Put on more buses. Well, this may make sense to you and me, but to Stagecoach it may as well be Estonian.

Instead, on March 13 Stagecoach raised the price of monthly "Go Rider" bus passes by \$10 a month. Why?

Stagecoach's official propaganda line is:

"In August last year... Stagecoach undertook a three-month promotion of monthly passes. However that promotion finished at the end of November and now it is time for our monthly fares and day passes to be increased to restore our fare balance equity." - www.stagecoach.co.nz

So, let me get this straight. You have a promotion and lower your fares to get people using the monthly passes. And then when it ends you increase the price past the original price... it's not much of a promotion.

I think the price rise is because if a bus is late, it uses more fuel and therefore the cost of running the bus increases.

In other words, Stagecoach intends on taking at least an extra \$80 per year from each student on a monthly pass, so it can laugh as students become poorer. \$80 is a lot of money in student land. That is almost enough money for a textbook, Big Day Out ticket, or a modest amount of beer.

To show that Stagecoach is interested in money and not in good service, I will give you some facts from around the country.

- During the financial year ending March 31, 2004, Stagecoach Auckland's profit was just under \$19 Million. Now that is a lot of beer.

- Massey University students in Palmerston North enjoy free buses.

- Many businesses offer student discounts. For example, the Recreation Centre recognises that students are poor and charges you roughly 1/5th the standard price. However, Stagecoach charges university students the same as everyone else for using its buses.

A way of improving Stagecoach's customer service could be to introduce a policy of discounted fares if the bus is late. For instance, if the bus is 10 or more minutes late then you only have to pay a child's fare and if the bus is 20 or more minutes late then the trip is free (for people with monthly passes if the bus is late by 20 or more minutes five times in a month then the next month is free).

I don't have an option of refusing to pay the fare increase. Because of the monopoly that Stagecoach holds on Auckland's public transport network, I have no other way of making it to Albany. Is it fair for Stagecoach Auckland to use this monopoly to take more money from students for an unreliable bus service?

So what can be done?

Email Stagecoach Auckland (contact Russell Turnbull: russell.turnbull@stagecoach.co.nz) complaining about the lack of a decent service, the late buses, the overcrowded buses, the prices, and anything else you want to say. Make sure that you state a solution to the problem as well – like *more buses* to and from Massey.

Also send the email to Joel Cayford (joelc@kiwilink.co.nz - Transport Chair

of the Auckland Regional Council). Don't be discouraged by the way they brush you off with the propaganda that they will send back to you (see quote on previous page). We need an immediate fix not a "bright" future solution.

The more people complaining, the better. The more pressure, the greater the chance for change.

See you again soon, As soon as the bus shows up.

What is the Northern Busway?

A motorway for buses, beside the Northern Motorway from Albany to the Harbour Bridge.

Consisting of five main stations, it is to provide:

- Better local bus interchanges and shelters
- Bus and combined bus/carpool lanes in city streets
- Help for buses to get through intersections faster
- Better connections with ferries and other transport

There will be buses linking stations and from there you have to walk or catch another bus to get to the surrounding suburbs.

For more information see www.busway.co.nz

Opinion: why the busway will not solve bus problems

In fact it may make them worse. Servicing only five stations directly, and then making passengers get a second bus to the area they need to be, will only increase trip times and not decrease them.

Take for instance the Albany Station. It is located at the back of the Albany Mega Centre, A 20 minute walk to Massey. It's an even greater walk to the Industrial Park. Massey University and the Industrial Park contain the most bus users from Albany and instead of

making it easier to get there it will be harder.

There will be no direct connection between Albany and Auckland. This is what is needed most. The Busway will travel through other stations and this will cause an increase in travel times because there will be a greater number of people at these stations due to less stops. The current service will not improve much in July 2005 as the majority of the Busway will not be complete until late 2006.

Will this new development mean that my bus fare will increase?

No. Not as a result of the Busway project.

