

Bus plans create risk of monopoly

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A limit may be put on the number of Sydney regions a bus contractor can run to prevent a monopoly developing, suggests the Unsworth review of the bus industry.

Wanting to streamline the city's bus network, inquiry head Barrie

Unsworth plans to cut bus territories from 74 to 10, giving a handful of companies responsibility for running the city's whole passenger fleet.

But he recognised that amalgamating the existing regions into much larger territories increases "the possibility of market dominance by one operator", with the Government-owned State Transit now covering much of the turf in four of the 10 proposed regions.

"It may be necessary to limit the proportion of the bus market that one operator can control," wrote Mr Unsworth in the interim report of his inquiry into the bus industry, released yesterday amid concern about proposed fare increases.

The vice-president of the Combined Pensioners and Superannuants Association of NSW, Bruce Hutton, welcomed the extension of the seniors' excursion ticket to all metropolitan transport. But he said it was unfair to restrict the ticket - which would be raised to \$2.50 - to pensioners and war widows, as a lot of self-funded retirees lived just above the pension.

The Greens found limiting travel on the pensioners' ticket to after 9am on weekdays divisive. MP Lee Rhiannon said older people led busy lives.

"It is clear that Mr Unsworth has not travelled on a bus recently as they are hardly packed with pensioners during morning peak hour," she said.

Unions were generally supportive of the proposed changes. The Transport Workers Union said putting the more heavily subsidised State Transit fares up to the private bus level in western Sydney - 24 per cent higher on average - recognised a long-standing inequity.

Mr Unsworth said if fares were equalised, it would be over a five-year period and would mainly affect those travelling on long-haul State Transit trips, like Palm Beach to the CBD.

The Rail, Tram and Bus union gave "reserved support" for the report - to be followed by a final version in February - as it was concerned there might be a hidden agenda of "privatisation or corporatisation of bus services".

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The Federation of Parents and Citizens Association of NSW did not support a proposed annual payment of \$30 per student for travel passes.

The Transport Services Minister, Michael Costa - who ordered the Unsworth review as well as the ongoing Parry inquiry into public transport - said Sydney's bus network, with different ticket prices for different operators, was not fair to taxpayers or commuters.

The underlying concept of the Unsworth report is that a network of high-quality bus corridors - used by various bus routes and featuring improved speeds through bus lanes and bus signals - and a reduction in operators could make the system more efficient and allow better planning to meet demand.

"In the short term we'd be suggesting that [small bus companies] . . . merge with others," Mr Unsworth said.

"There's no reason why they couldn't become part of a larger whole."

The head of the Bus and Coach Association, Darryl Mellish, said if the changes were implemented, he "would expect that larger, stronger ones [bus companies] to be in a better position to dominate each of these regions".