

TCO REVIEW

1 March 2015 – 31 August 2015

**Michael Arnold
Tolling Customer Ombudsman**

TOLLING CUSTOMER OMBUDSMAN REVIEW

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Introduction

The last quarter has seen the expansion of toll roads in metropolitan road systems which will assist the travelling public. Discussions also continue to take place in respect to alternative pricing and cost recovery for the use of toll roads to better assist traffic management.

There is no doubt that there are issues of traffic congestion in our major capital cities that need to be addressed. Toll roads are part of the traffic system upon which a significant part of the travelling public rely. Toll road customers are entitled to the most up-to-date systems and fairest pricing regimes.

In this regard, I note that a toll operator, in an effort to improve its customer experience, in April 2015 introduced a number of new business rules. One rule in particular authorised frontline agents to waive/write-off significant notice administration fees; up to 100% in the event a pre-paid account is opened. The long term goal in incentivising new accounts in such a way is to reduce no-arrangement travel and consequential enforcement. The positive impact of this business rule was immediate, as demonstrated in its case and complaint reduction in addition to the increased take-up of new accounts.

A number of other improvements were also introduced during the review period, including a redesigned Toll Notice (April), which now provides more clarity as to why it was generated, the potential escalation paths and education on how to avoid further notices. Additionally, a review of its website was undertaken to improve the user experience. This review has resulted in changes that will be rolled out in a staged approach over the remainder of 2015.

Such innovation will only go to improve the travelling experience of toll road customers and should be encouraged.

Customer Service

The constant in complaints that come to me is in relation to aspects of customer service. Issues relate to the time taken to establish telephone contact, the responsiveness of telephone operators, the failure to return promised update calls and the accuracy of the information provided by the telephone operators.

There is no doubt that customers can equate a failure to accept their arguments in respect to an issue with poor customer service, in the course of a telephone call. It is incumbent on toll operators, however, to have processes that deal with complaints efficiently and effectively. This requires the avoidance of delay in responding to calls and any failure to follow-up on calls.

Signage

Signage is an issue which I have discussed from time to time in my six-monthly Reviews published on the TCO website. Such Reviews are available for examination by toll road operators, State Government bodies and the public.

I have had a number of complaints about different aspects of the level of signage as it impacted upon customers individually. These have been referred to toll operators to consider and respond. The practical problem is how to implement change to meet each individual requirement without it creating difficulty for other toll road users.

In view of some recent complaints it is necessary to reinforce that the provision of adequate and informative signage is important for toll road customers. It is a matter for the relevant State Government authorities and the toll operators to consider and monitor the adequacy of signage to assist customer travel and making contact with toll operators. Considerations of safety must be taken into account, but there must be effective information provided on the toll roads that enables the road users to understand their payment obligations.

However, any changes must be made in the light of overall toll road customer experience and not on the basis of individual dissatisfaction, in order to have a system that satisfies the majority of customers.

Notification of toll operators on sale of vehicle

There continue to be frequent examples of both account holding and no-arrangement for travel customers being charged for the use of toll roads after they have sold their vehicles to a third party purchaser.

The problem is caused because the account customers fail to notify the toll operator of the sale, either out of forgetfulness or in the belief that there is a linkage between the toll operator and the State motor vehicle registration agency. I have advocated previously that there should be consultation between the toll operators and the State motor vehicle registration agencies with a view to putting in place a system that could overcome this problem of notifying toll operators of the sale. In regard to casual customers, it is important the State motor vehicle registration agencies record changes of ownership of vehicles in a timely manner as toll operators rely on this information for the delivery of toll invoices and demands.

Pending this, at the least, toll operators should provide notices to be displayed by the State motor vehicle registration agencies at the point of sale, reminding all toll road users selling a vehicle of the obligation to advise the toll operator of the sale.

Similarly, such notices could be displayed at motor vehicle rental outlets, reminding customers of the need to cancel any arrangement they may have had with a toll operator during the rental period.

These steps would reduce the number of complaints that come to me.

Statutory Declarations

Questions have also been raised by customers of the need for continuous Statutory Declarations in situations where they have sold their vehicle, and the purchaser has not registered the change of ownership at the State motor vehicle registration agency. There are often stringent requirements on the customers to complete a number of Statutory Declarations within a prescribed time or they may be liable for tolls incurred by the purchaser of the vehicle.

Consideration should be given by toll operators to recording the information provided by the customer in an initial Statutory Declaration with a view to removing the requirement of the continuous provision of Statutory Declarations.

Training of call centre operators

I appreciate that significant training is given to call centre operators in respect to the establishment of accounts and the payments of tolls, whether under these accounts or for non-account customers.

There are many complaints arising from these transactions which may be based on a misunderstanding of customers. Communication problems can often occur in telephone conversations and special care should be taken in the recording of:

- a) licence plate details for vehicle(s) being added to an account, and
- b) the removal of vehicle(s) from an account.

Some single vehicle customers believe that by adding a new vehicle to an account, the existing vehicle will be automatically removed. This is not the case and it should be made clear to the customers.

Transparency of account details

It is important that when customers seek details of amounts owing to a toll operator under an account or otherwise, they should be advised not only of the amounts owing under their current account, but all monies owing under outstanding toll notices or toll demands. They should be further advised of what matters have been escalated to a Government agency or debt collector due to the non-payment of toll invoices or toll demands within the required time frame. Customers can be confused unless there is clarity in this regard when telephone contact is made.

Conclusion

The single most complaint that comes to the Tolling Customer Ombudsman continues to be in relation to the level of fees billed for administration in respect to unpaid tolls. This is a matter that is not within my jurisdiction in States where fees are fixed by toll operators in consultation with State Governments. In such matters raised with me, I explain that the administration fees are for cost recovery and do not include a penalty or benefit to the toll operator. However, this is a matter of controversy and there should be complete transparency in relation to the fixing of such fees in order to ensure customer confidence.

Below is a table of complaints and outcomes for the reporting period.



Michael Arnold
Tolling Customer Ombudsman

AirportlinkM7
CityLink
EastLink
Go Via
Roam
Roam Express

Category	March 15	April 15	May 15	June 15	July 15	August 15
Account Management	1					
	13	14	13	10	27	17
	6		4	4	4	4
	26	18	40	35	46	55
	3	8	5	3	12	8
	4		1	2	6	2
Billing/Tolling	7	7	4	5	11	8
	7	2	8	3	5	17
	2	4	3	4	8	6
	10	29	34	34	25	32
	2	1	3	2	4	3
	4	3	3	5	4	1
Service				1	2	
	2					
				1		
					1	
Damage to Vehicle						1
					1	
	1	1				
Infrastructure/ Traffic Management		2				
					2	
Vehicle Classification		1				
				1		
TOTAL	8	7	4	5	11	8
	20	19	21	14	34	35
	8	4	7	8	12	10
	38	47	74	70	73	87
	5	9	8	6	17	11
	9	4	4	7	11	3
Resolved/Closed by Customer Resolutions	8	7	4	5	11	8
	20	19	21	14	34	35
	8	4	7	8	12	10
	38	47	74	70	73	87
	5	9	8	6	17	11
	9	4	4	7	11	3