

TCO REVIEW

1 September 2015 – 29 February 2016

**Michael Arnold
Tolling Customer Ombudsman**

TOLLING CUSTOMER OMBUDSMAN REVIEW

1 SEPTEMBER 2015 – 29 FEBRUARY 2016

Introduction

This Review follows on my previous review and is directed to the need for efficient and effective means of communication and technology to enable interaction between toll operators and their customers. Good communication is a benefit to Government agencies and private sector businesses, but the lack of communication is one of the most commonly raised problems. The failure to have in place adequate systems for communication can cause a high level of dissatisfaction.

Telephone and online communication channels

It is important that toll operators have a responsive telecommunication strategy as well user-friendly online processes that enable toll road customers to access their accounts or other road users to pay tolls and fees. Complaints are often raised about difficulties with telephone contact that range from delays, inadequate knowledge and unresponsiveness. Allegations of poor service in the form of failure to follow up on promises to return telephone calls are often made. Proper training is essential in this regard.

In conjunction with this, complaints are made about the quality of online service and the difficulties that some customers have accessing their accounts. The use of online services is a benefit to toll operators and there should be continued improvement to meet the requirements of customers. Consumers, with their greater sophistication in respect to technology, should be able to readily access a toll operator's services.

Advanced technology

Complaints are now being made about the level of technology and the sophistication of toll operators' systems. It is trite to say that technological change has revolutionised the system of businesses interacting with their customers. The use of new technology will not resolve all aspects of customer relations, but its application can avoid unnecessary problems. The important thing for toll operators is to keep abreast of the technological changes so that they can take advantage of aspects beneficial to their customers and their organisation.

Administration fees

The issue of administration fees charged by toll operators is constantly brought up by toll road customers or users. The issue is brought up in the context of the escalation of the toll collection process by either Government or private agencies. The fixing of tolls and fees varies from State to State, with some fixed in formal consultation with the Government whilst others are set on a commercial cost covering basis by the toll operators.

I understand that toll operators would prefer for customers to pay in accordance with requirements and avoid the necessity of the administration costs involved in collection of unpaid tolls. The reality is that some toll road users do not meet their obligations in this regard.

Importantly, there are principles at law that apply to the fixing of such fees. Irrespective of the way administration fees are fixed, they must not impose a penalty on the customer but must reflect the actual costs to the toll operator for the administrative work involved.

Escalation of toll collection

With respect to the escalation in the toll collection, there are variations in the approaches taken by the toll operators. Some are currently subject to legislative provisions, others not.

Firstly, the aim must be for toll operators to have systems in place to enable toll account customers or toll road users the opportunity to pay tolls or any additional fees in a user-friendly and timely manner. This should include the use of all technology to advise, wherever possible, where there has been a default, eg insufficient funds in a credit card account.

Secondly, in the event of default, the customer must be advised of the escalation process and the additional costs involved and be given fair opportunity to pay prior to the escalation. Difficulties, as discussed in previous Reviews, inevitably arise when the toll road user has changed address/motor vehicle registration and not advised the appropriate motor registration agency. Despite the availability to make changes online, customers often do not do so.

There was one particular non-account toll road user who had not notified the motor registration agency of his change of address. The toll operator sent notices to the toll road user at the address registered but they were not received by the user before there had been escalation involving extra fees. The toll operator waived fees and the matter was resolved. There were, however, concerns that the toll operator could not change the toll road user's address records from those at the motor registration agency as the user did not have an account with the operator. This is an issue that should be examined.

Thirdly, toll operators should give consideration to a compromise on the amounts outstanding or offer a reasonable repayment plan for such amounts when the circumstances warrant it, both prior and subsequent to escalation.

Conclusion

I note that there continues to be a high level of dispute resolution of the complaints that fall within the TCO's jurisdiction in a timely manner. I have indicated before that this is a benefit to toll road operators, their account holders and toll road users generally. This trend should be enhanced with toll collection management and the use of technology that can assist customers in the payment of tolls and toll invoices.

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	Sept 15	Oct 15	Nov 15	Dec 15	Jan 16	Feb 16
Account Management	1	-	-	2	2	-
	20	18	15	15	12	14
	7	5	3	2	5	6
	65	71	43	43	26	42
	6	7	5	3	2	6
	2	5	2	-	-	3
Billing/Tolling	4	13	10	11	7	8
	7	9	10	10	6	5
	1	5	4	3	6	3
	25	32	25	24	19	32
	6	2	3	7	1	4
	4	4	2	1	5	3
Service	1		1	2		
			1			
	2	5		1	2	3
Damage to Vehicle		1		2		
Infrastructure/ Traffic Management						1
					1	
	1					
Vehicle Classification	3	1	4	2	1	2
		1			1	
				1		1
Website		1				
		1				
Enquiry/Copy to TCO only						

Category	Sept 15	Oct 15	Nov 15	Dec 15	Jan 16	Feb 16
TOTAL	5	13	10	13	9	8
	31	30	30	31	19	22
	8	11	8	5	13	9
	93	109	68	69	47	78
	12	9	8	10	3	10
	6	9	4	1	5	6
Resolved/Closed by Customer Resolutions	5	13	10	13	9	8
	31	30	30	31	19	22
	8	11	8	5	13	9
	93	109	68	69	47	77
	12	9	8	10	3	10
	6	9	4	1	5	6
Pending						
						1