

Newspaper: TODAY

Date: 7 February 2006

Title: Buses all bunched up, I've nowhere to go

Time and again, SBS has explained away complaints of the "bunching" of buses with reasons such as traffic congestion.

But on Jan 26, I witnessed two Service 53 buses leaving the Changi Airport Terminal 2 (T2) bus station at the same time! I am sure SBS cannot offer the above mentioned reason in this case.

That day, I waited for Service 53 for more than 40 minutes at T2 before the two buses arrived together at 8.15pm — one crowded and one almost empty. Five minutes later, both buses left the station together.

While the two buses could have been held up by traffic congestion somewhere along the route before they arrived bunched together at T2, why did they leave the T2 bus station at the same time?

Why is it that in this age of computers, satellite technology and just-in-time systems, the bus services are still scheduled using inefficient methods? There was a pool of other buses available at the bus station at that time — at least three No 27 buses at that time left T2 with only a few passengers on board. Why couldn't other buses be redeployed at the bus station and the services slightly readjusted if one service faces a long delay?

There have been numerous occasions when I waited for more than an hour at T2 for No 53 while several other buses — mostly almost empty — came and went.

It seems that bus assignments are cast in stone and are not adjusted according to real conditions. That is, Service X can only run as Service X. I am sure with the benefit of computers, buses can be reassigned at the bus terminus whenever a bus is delayed — Service X replacing Service Y — so that the buses are back on schedule starting from the terminus.

Huang Pengxie

Date: 8 February 2006

Title: Conduct survey to assess bus services

I agree with Huang Pengxie ("Buses all bunched up, I've nowhere to go", Feb 7).

I fear when this matter is brought up with bus operators or the Public Transport Council (PTC), the blame will be passed on to motorists who "hog" bus lanes.

Maybe, it is time for the authorities to conduct a nation-wide survey to gauge commuters' assessment of our bus services.

I hope that stiffer fines will be imposed on bus operators, just like what is being done for taxi operators. In my area in Tampines, for example, there has been no improvement in the frequency of Service 291, despite our feedback over four years.

Soh Poh Huat

Date: 10 February 2006

Title: Bus bunching happens off-peak too

I refer to Huang Pengxie's letter, "Buses All Bunch Up, I've Nowhere To Go" (Feb 7), and Soh Poh Huat's response, "Conduct Survey To Assess Bus Services" (Feb 8).

I have been observing the frequency of bus services and collected some data. I certainly agree with Huang's comments. The Public Transport Council (PTC) has stated that the bus delays are due to traffic jams and that it has carried out audits on the bus companies. Yet, looking at what I have observed, one wonders just what sort of audit the PTC does.

I am a regular commuter especially on bus No 16. I have observed that this service has the habit of having two buses arriving at the same time, and usually less than half full. This happened on Dec 9, 11.05pm; Dec 10, 11.10pm; Dec22, 10.50pm (all three time at Old Airport Road); Dec 24, 10.25pm; Dec 26 at 6.35pm and again at 10.45pm (at Stadium Lane, Stadium Walk and Stamford Road). You can imagine a commuter missing one bus and having to wait 20 to 30 minutes for the next one.

One must not forget that such poor scheduling not only results in poor services, it also means a loss in revenue. Perhaps nobody cares because there is monopoly and no competition.

Where once productivity was the key to higher profits, it is no more relevant these days.

To increase profits, you just need to increase fares!

Vincent Chin

Reply from SBS Transit

I refer to the letters "Buses all bunched up, I've nowhere to go" by Huang Pengxie dated 7 February, "Conduct survey to assess bus services" by Soh Poh Huat dated 8 February and "Bus bunching happens off-peak too" by Vincent Chin dated 10 February 2006.

SBS Transit would like to assure our commuters that we try as far as possible to ensure that our buses arrive at regular intervals. The bus arrival times at terminals and the capacity of our buses at high loading points of their journey are regularly monitored to ensure that most of our commuters' needs are met. Yet, as we have explained in our previous replies, the regulation of buses is very much dependant on the varying road conditions each day. *In fact, more than 70% of our delays are caused by adverse traffic conditions.* The result is that our Bus Captains would not always be able to stick to the schedules because of traffic jams.

Take Service 53 for example. Mr Huang commented in his letter that two Service 53 buses arrived at and left Changi Terminal 2 at about the same time at 8.15pm on 26 January 2006. According to our investigation, the two Service 53 buses were supposed to arrive at Changi Airport Terminal 2 at 7.54pm and 8.17pm respectively. But the first bus was delayed due to a traffic jam at Loyang Avenue. As such, it arrived at about the same time as the second bus.

Here is a photo of the traffic condition along Tampines Ave 7 and Loyang Ave on a typical day during the peak period. The photo clearly shows that a few of our buses are caught in the jam.



Generally, when two buses of the same service arrive at the terminal at the same time, our staff at the terminal or interchange will make adjustments to their next departure time so that they will not leave the terminal at the same time. But when one bus is significantly late, as it was in this case due to the massive jam, the rescheduling was minor – so as to ensure that there is no knock-on effect affecting other buses down the line. In the cited case, the two buses continued on from Changi Airport Terminal 2 bus stop only two minutes apart.

Mr Huang also suggested that bus assignments not be cast in stone so they can be adjusted to suit real conditions. Where possible, this is already being done. But as we do not have spare buses and bus captains sitting around waiting for disruption to happen (often because there is no space to park the buses as in the case at Changi Airport Terminal 2), there is a limit to such changes.

For Service 291, Mr Soh Poh Huat did not indicate the date and time in which he experienced irregular frequency. Hence, we are unable to investigate further. We invite Mr Soh to call us at our customer feedback hotline 1800 287 2727 to provide us with more information about his experience with Service 291 so that we can conduct further investigation.

However, with regard to the comment about Service 291, where he has asked for improvement to the frequency, our check shows that the utilization rate for the service is only 58% during the peak 1 hour period in the morning. Given this, the frequency of the service in the morning peak has been set at 4 to 6 minutes which by any standard is very close. Of course, everyone would like to have more frequent services, but they come at a cost. As responsible transport operator, we have to ensure that the capacity supplied is in tandem with the demand for such services. If the demand justifies it, we will provide the capacity.

With regard to the bus bunching of Service 16 experienced by Mr Vincent Chin on 9, 10, 22 and 24 December 2005, our investigations revealed that buses were delayed due to the heavy traffic along Orchard Road area at that late hour due to Christmas shopping. This resulted in the bunching.

Adding more buses is not a solution in this case as more buses will end up being caught in the jam, and even more bunching will occur when they do eventually emerge from the traffic slowdown.

We assure Mr Soh we are not in the business of scheduling our buses to bunch.

We wish to also assure Mr Chin that it is insufficient for us to just depend on fare increases to maintain our profits. Our fare increase in 2005 was 1.8% after the introduction of a \$3.45 million package to help mitigate the impact of the fare increase on certain group of passengers like the senior citizens. The package also included a contribution of \$1.15 million to the Public Transport Fund for the needy. Against this, the fuel price increase was almost 50%! As such, contrary to what Mr Chin said, productivity is still very important and relevant to public transport operators today.

To improve the reliability of our services, we have worked with the authority to add bus lanes and put up "Give way to Buses Exiting" signs at some bus stops to encourage other road users to make it easier for buses to exit the bus bays. We will also be introducing the Automatic Vehicle Management System to allow us to know where our buses are at any time so that corrective actions can be taken should they fall behind or ahead of schedule.

We thank the writers for their feedback.

Yours sincerely,

TAMMY TAN (MS)
DIRECTOR
CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS
SBS TRANSIT LTD

**Note: Diagram and text in italic are added on to our online reply to better explain the situation.*