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Fullers denies 'golden' profits from travel scheme

Campaigners urge fare reductions in wake of subsidy

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Fullers Ferries is refuting suggestions from an island lobby group that it has profited from the SuperGold scheme at commuters' expense.

The denial comes in the wake of figures released by the island's Campaign 4 Fair Ferry Fares (C4FFF) group last week.

The group estimates a total of \$756,429 (excluding GST) was claimed by Fullers from the SuperGold reimbursement scheme for Waiheke ferry services between 1 October and 28 February 2009.

C4FFF spokesman Cathy Urquhart says it means nearly a quarter of the subsidy Auckland Regional Transport Authority (ARTA) gets from government goes to Fullers.

And she is asking why ferry fares have not changed to reflect the extra cash Fullers is getting as well as the continuing slide in diesel costs.

"Fullers is pocketing a huge benefit from the SuperGold card scheme and the falling diesel prices but it hasn't yet passed on those savings

in a fair and transparent way," charges Urquhart.

"We estimate the SuperGold subsidy will represent a 20 percent windfall by the end of winter. Far from Infratil divesting itself from an underperforming business by selling Fullers to Souter Holdings, it would seem Fullers is doing very nicely thank you."

Urquhart added the group would be watching Fullers carefully during coming months and said issues such as fares, levies, surcharges, bus concessions and integrated ticketing should be openly discussed.

Meanwhile, Fullers chief executive Doug Hudson is denying the suggestion commuters are hard-done-by.

He told Waiheke Marketplace things were not that simple.

He said around half of the GoldCard users were now travelling free instead of paying fares of one type or another – including commuter fares.

"SuperGold is not the huge windfall people might think. Many island residents commute on SuperGold that

used to travel on the normal fare. And current passenger levels are the same as they were about a year ago," he said.

Hudson said C4FFF had also failed to take into account any rise in the costs of wages, marine safety compliance, or capital investment to upgrade Waiheke services – such as the company's purchase of two new boats, Adventurer and Wanderer.

He said the Wanderer was a much faster boat – used between Mondays and Thursdays to make journeys home quicker after 7pm.

And he warned some difficult decisions would have had to have been made were it not for the SuperGold subsidy.

"SuperGold has made up for a shortfall in a recession. We are down about 10 percent across all services. Without SuperGold, we would be looking at reduction in patronage levels.

"It's a good thing," he added.

But the prospect of SuperGold travel continuing on ferry services is by no means certain in any case.

Government will be looking at the scheme as part of its review of the Public Transport Management Act this July.