Why the switch to distance-based fares

THE concept of distance-based fares came into public notice in January 2008, when Transport Minister Raymond Lim unveiled the Land Transport Review after a consultation process involving more than 4,500 people.

Back then, the ministry had planned to introduce distance fares by 2009. As it turned out, the new fare scheme kicked in on July 3 this year.

Describing it as a fairer system, Mr Lim explained that without distance-based fares, commuters making transfers were subsidising those who made direct journeys.

He said that transfers were integral to Singapore's hub-and-spoke transport network, noting that the previous scheme discouraged people from making transfers.

The nuts and bolts of the new fare scheme were worked out in July 2008. It was debated and approved in Parliament in August 2008.

Distance fares do away with the extra sum that commuters have to pay when making a transfer: the “transfer penalty.”

In other words, the commuter pays for the total distance he is travelling regardless of how he gets there. This gives him greater flexibility in planning his route.

In 2008, Mr Lim gave the example of a student travelling from Singapore Management University (SMU) to Sin Ming Avenue. He could either:

- Take direct bus service 162 from SMU, which cost $1.19, or
- Take bus service 166 or 167 if it comes along first, and make a transfer along Upper Thomson Road onto service 52, 410 or 162, whichever arrives first. This would cost him $1.61 because of the transfer penalty.

Under distance-based fares, the price for both routes would be the same. The distances of all legs of a journey are accumulated and charged once.

Some commuters have misunderstood the new fare scheme, thinking that they have to make transfers in order to benefit.

This is incorrect as the fare should be the same for a particular distance regardless of how many transfers are made, whether between different bus routes or between buses and trains.

To phase in the distance fare scheme, the Public Transport Council (PTC) introduced rebates on the transfer penalty.

It increased the rebates progressively in 2008, 2009 and 2010.

By this year, the total rebate on the transfer penalty was 50 cents. Transfer rebates and penalties were removed with the new distance fare scheme.

Several rules apply to the calculation of distance-based fares. They are:

- A transfer time limit of 45 minutes;
- All journeys must be within two hours of first boarding;
- Only a single entry and exit is allowed for trains;
- At most five transfers can be made.

In addition, distance is not the only component used when computing fares.

On trains, the fare between a pair of stations is also based on the fastest route of travel, taking into account the walking and waiting time required.

A train trip from Bras Basah station to Serangoon station, for example, is calculated as having a distance of 11.4km. The journey costs $1.58.

However, a train trip from Bras Basah station to Kovan, which is farther away than Serangoon, costs only $1.46. The distance between Bras Basah and Kovan is calculated at 8.9km.

Why does a commuter need to pay more to go to Serangoon than to Kovan, if the latter is farther away on the North East Line?

This is because the fare for the journey from Bras Basah to Serangoon station is based on the fastest travel route via the Circle Line.

As both stations are on the Circle Line, commuters do not need to switch between rail lines.

The fastest route in this case also happens to be longer, which is why the fare is higher.

Previously, students and senior citizens paid only a flat rate regardless of the distance travelled. The new fare scheme charges them by distance, with certain caps (see chart).

A few online fare calculators are available.

The official one by the Land Transport Authority is at www.publictransport.sg.

An alternative can be found at www.gothere.sg, but the fares on that website are estimates.