

Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Impact on Medium to High Density Residential Buildings and Essential Services

Strata Community Association (ACT) Submission

24 March 2020

Introduction

Following announcements from Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments, the Strata sector of the community is concerned about potential confusion surrounding terms such as “Non-Essential Services”. The Strata sector seeks to ensure all Governments are furnished with a complete understanding of the essential role of Building Managers employed within Strata buildings across the ACT, and we request confirmation that these services will be included in any definition of “Essential Services” once policy is announced.

The current situation within higher density accommodation is unprecedented and the demands that this will place upon the facilities within Strata buildings is untested. The impact on these increased demands of the essential services of residential buildings due to self-isolation, forced isolation, restricted travel and unemployment needs to be considered.

It is envisaged that the hours in residence will dramatically increase and therefore the demands on the facilities within the buildings will be increased accordingly. This will also require increased management and servicing to avoid overwhelming essential services.

In higher density buildings, the service compliance requirements, as well as the operational needs, are monitored and managed by on-site managers. Building Managers are best placed to understand the needs of the building and are a key part of the safety of the building, its residents and the service technicians.

In light of the current circumstances, the Building Managers role becomes even more imperative to the safe operation of buildings.

Strata Market

This relentless growth in the size of the market has generated an intensively competitive and rapidly evolving service sector. The governance and technical features of strata buildings increasingly require a high degree of specialist knowledge among all the many and varied trades and services that operate within the broader property services industry. The difference between common and private property, and the decision-making processes of body corporate committees, add a degree of complexity to trade and service delivery. Strata managers are the key link in this value chain.

Based on the 2016 Census, more than 39,000 people across the ACT live in flats and apartments, the vast majority being strata titled. This figure does not include other forms of strata title such as townhouses and community titled developments. Nor does it include businesses operating in strata titled commercial buildings.

A 2018 survey of state and territory land title records¹ showed there were 3,189 strata schemes in the ACT comprising 34,807 individual lots. Their combined replacement value exceeds \$21 billion.

¹ Australian National Strata Data 2018, UNSW City Futures Research Centre

Strata Management Services

Direct employment in specialist strata management companies is approaching 10,000 people. More significantly, they are pivotal in an estimated \$6.7 billion in annual economic activity².

Strata managers are required to navigate through a maze of legislation and regulation ranging from actual strata specific legislation to Workplace Health and Safety, Building Codes (including cladding regulation), as well as measures applicable to the management of body corporate funds. A strata manager is expected to be knowledgeable on a range of issues relating to the management of a scheme and skilled to deal with interpersonal challenges. Many of the areas a strata manager advises on are specialised, detailed and complex.

Proposed Essential Service Single Point of Access

Strata and Building Management services offer an alternative to having service providers attending sites and meeting with a multitude of residents to assess and address repairs and maintenance.

The Single Point of Access allows an opportunity to have control measures in place to protect the service providers from having to interact with residents and vice versa.

In buildings where there is Building Management on site, an access provision can be made to allow safe access to the building and other areas with minimal interaction with either residents or the Building Manager. Buildings where there is no Building Manager, safe access arrangements can be provided via the Strata Management company.

Essential Services and Compliance Requirements

(a) Waste Management

Required as part of the operational acceptance of the Development Application pursuant to the registration of a Units Plan and based upon a Waste Management Strategy included with every Development Application, waste collection often requires the involvement of personnel to move waste and rotate hoppers within a building's waste rooms as well as presentation of the hoppers for local Government contractor collection. We have included a selection of Waste Management Plans as examples marked "Attachment A".

We have noted an increase in the requirement for waste movement due to the number of people who are working from home.

Further increases of residents based primarily at home will result in further increases for rotations and the number of services for collection.

All buildings with waste or recycling chutes as well as any with multiple waste rooms will require manual movement of the waste hoppers.

(b) Fire Monitoring

Building Managers will continue monitoring of the Fire Panels to be able to report faults and reduce the need for increased attendances by service technicians. Essential equipment for the safety of all residents and a compliance requirement.

² Australian National Strata Data 2018, UNSW City Futures Research Centre

(c) Vertical Transport

Compliance requirement for regular servicing as well as dealing with periodic issues that arise. Breakdowns may increase due to increased usage. Essential equipment for the safety of all residents and a compliance requirement. Onsite management reduces the number of and severity of the breakdowns.

(d) Hydraulic Infrastructure

The use and misuse will increase. The misuse will also include residents flushing inappropriate items through the system like alternatives to toilet paper rendering the system inoperable. It has already become an issue in certain buildings.

(e) Electrical and Communications Infrastructure

The demands on these items are due to increase as more people are required to work from home. These demands will also increase due to the social needs of residents to interact safely with family and friends.

(f) Cleaning

Increased visits will be required for the disinfection of common area facilities including bathrooms, lobby entrances and all associated access furniture, vertical transport including all operation buttons and various other touch points throughout the building.

Conclusion

The members of SCA (ACT) respectfully agree to the decisions from the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments, in relation to the reduction of “Non-Essential Services”.

Confusion around the “Non-Essential Services” carries greater risk and uncertainty. We don’t want the safety of the building and those living in strata to have potentially adverse and unintended consequences.

Any proposed workforce interruptions must take into consideration the critical functions of Strata buildings.

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Mr Chris Miller, President of the Strata Community Association (ACT), is available for a briefing on media@strata.community or **0400 376 208**