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**YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 034. Tips on How to Run a Good Strata Meeting -
with Karina Heinz (references to NSW law)**

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Intro: Welcome to Your Strata Property. The podcast for property owners looking for reliable, accurate, and bite-sized information from an experienced and authoritative source. To access previous episodes and useful strata tips, go to www.yourstrataproperty.com.au.

Amanda Farmer: Hello and welcome. I'm Amanda Farmer and this is Your Strata Property. Karina Heinz is the managing director of Progressive Strata Services, an innovative boutique strata management company in Sydney's eastern suburbs.

Her aim is to provide quality and cost efficient strata management services to buildings in New South Wales in particular the greater Sydney area. Karina has over 23 years experience in strata management. Her company has been built up over many years by taking on one building at a time.

Strata management is all she does and she does it exceptionally well. Karina is also a member of the Women in Strata steering committee. Today, I am delighted to welcome Karina Heinz of Progressive Strata Services. Welcome, Karina.

Karina Heinz: Thank you very much, Amanda.

Amanda Farmer: Karina, with 23 years' experience in strata management, one thing that you will be an absolute expert on is strata meetings and of course, that's what we are here today to talk about.

I'm going to ask you, Karina, can you tell us why a proper understanding of meetings and meeting procedure is such a critical issue for people living in strata?

Karina Heinz: I'm very happy to. It is something that I'm very passionate about because I like to follow precedent cases in strata management and often in this day and age where particularly even in New South Wales people are very litigious, what has just happened in a meeting or hasn't been noted in a meeting or the process hasn't been correctly followed has brought schemes undone.

So I find this something that can be easily avoided and doesn't have to happen if some very simple procedures are followed, the government haven't made it complicated, it is about disclosure to all the owners in the scheme and that's why they have put the processes in place to help avoid these issues so yes I do see this as completely avoidable as a problem.

Amanda Farmer: Yes and I can say from a legal perspective that you are 100% right there, Karina. Sometimes it is the tiniest little matter of protocol or meeting procedure that hasn't been followed that ends up in Supreme Court litigation and I have seen chair people and secretaries and of course strata managers sitting in witness boxes answering questions about how the meeting was or wasn't run and wishing that they had followed or known about or applied the proper procedure at that time and avoided all of that. So, I agree with you 100%.

Karina Heinz: Thank you. Yes, it's completely avoidable as they say so let's see what we can do to make life easier for some people in all the schemes.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, definitely. So, on that point, what does a good strata meeting look like?

Karina Heinz: First of all, I don't think you can expect to achieve much if you haven't got an agenda. If people aren't aware of why



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they are getting together and then have the opportunity to prepare, get their thoughts together, work out what further information other than is attached to the agenda that they might need then there's not likely to be much great a success.

So there is the element that the government covers as to how notices are to be given to give people time to review that information depending on whether it's an executive meeting, it's 72 hours notice or whether it's a meeting of all the owners. They are entitled to have that agenda in their hands for 7 clear days.

So as long as those things are put together thoughtfully and sent out to the owners and then they take the time to prepare themselves by reviewing all of that, working out what additional information they may need and if they are able to ascertain that before the meeting so that they can come in with as much information as possible because they are acting on behalf of all the owners in the scheme not just themselves, so a fly by the seat of the pants exercise is not going to see the best objective in most cases.

Amanda Farmer: So you're talking there really I guess Karina about committees to a meeting, when you say that they're acting on behalf of all the owners, this is the committee of owners – soon to be called the strata committee here in New South Wales – they're having their regular meetings and what you are suggesting is that these people actually look at their agendas, first of all if the agenda is properly put together and it meets the requirements of the legislation and if these people are actually reading their agendas and know what they're sitting down about to discuss so that they can make informed and intelligent decisions.

Karina Heinz: Very true but I have to say I have also as I'm sure many a strata manager has seen an owner turn up to a meeting and when we're discussing the financials you can see them slowly flicking through.

So there are those who go through and highlight and know what their questions are but certainly I would say 50% if not more turn up and it's the first time they've looked at the document that they have come to discuss, whether it's discussing the past year's expenses or the future budget or a major work project and reviewing the quotes that are attached.

All of that is important so that the owner doesn't go away from an AGM or EGM thinking "oh, I wish I had asked this question" or they become concerned the next day because they weren't prepared and now a whole bunch of information has been put on them during the course of the meeting and they wonder whether or not a good decision has been made. So I do see that as all being able to be managed by the individuals and have control over by themselves.

It can only take 10 or 15 minutes to review the paperwork that's provided. I know in our busy day and age that can be hard, but most people spend some sort of time commuting, sitting, and waiting in the doctor's surgery or whatever it may be so to find 15 minutes in a week, a few days before the meeting shouldn't be that difficult.

The other side of things that I also see as very important is having a good chairman. Someone who can control the meeting, make sure that everybody has a fair say so that even the quietest, most timid person has a chance to ask their questions and get the answers that they need. But no one should feel intimidated to vote in a particular manner.

And I think the other thing that owners need to be aware of as well is the need for especially executive committee meetings to be up on the notice board that's a legal requirement. It varies on the size of the building as to the need otherwise to put it up or decisions schemes have made regarding other agendas and that's because the government as I said has provided that disclosure to owners so that if an owners corporation is not happy with a planned decision by their executive committee they have that 72 hours' notice, that's why there is that period that it has to be on the notice board, to talk to other owners and if they are concerned about the decision executive proposing to make they can get together and do what's called a requisition to prevent that decision being made.

And the current legislation that talks about the decision if the executive was to decide to go ahead regardless of being served and a notice of requisition by one-quarter of unit entitlement that it has no force or effect.

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Karina Heinz: So it leaves the owners still very much in control of their building. They don't need to feel powerless that the executive committee is going to go ahead and make decisions without consideration of them.

But obviously there is also that element that the government is considering that it can't be just one person who's able to bring things to a halt. It has to be a certain percentage and then perhaps, if that occurs, it may be ideal to refer it to a meeting of all the owners rather than just deciding that the matter has just got to be dropped.

Amanda Farmer: Great insights there Karina that I just want to draw out, going back to your comment about having a great chairperson, that has certainly been my experience attending strata meetings that those that are run well run under the guidance of a very skillful chair and it doesn't take much to be a good chairperson and to learn those skills.

You don't have to have sat on the board of a multimillion-dollar Australian Stock Exchange listed company to know how to run a strata meeting. At the same time you do have some serious obligations so if you are a chairperson and you're looking to improve those skills, definitely get out there have a chat to your strata manager who can they recommend, what can they recommend in terms of tools for you to have a look at to assist you in becoming a better chairperson.

There's plenty out there online certainly and I know what I do is I look at strata managers who I've seen run meetings really well and I watch what they do and I recommend what they do. So definitely I think having a chairperson who knows what they are doing is the path to a great meeting.

And the second insight that you've delivered to us there Karina which I think is important to flesh out for our listeners is the importance of notices, of committee meetings and even minutes of committee meetings being made available to owners and there is a legislative requirement as you say, that that be put on the notice board 3 days before the committee meeting is scheduled.

Owners need to know that it's happening; they need to know what's being discussed and as you point out why do they need to know? So that if they don't like it, they can do something about it.

And that's really important and some owners don't even realise that they have that right so thank you for highlighting that and I do agree that that is an important step for committees to be recognising that they need to do that and to make sure that they are taking that step because it can come all done if you miss that one.

Karina Heinz: Very true and as I say, those points are the basic things that do lead to court cases unfortunately because people feel that the executive has spent money that they weren't happy with and they want to do something about it. So it is very easily avoided if enough owners are not happy they can bring it to a halt so that it doesn't have to be litigated.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, excellent. Okay, Karina could you share a story with us about how some owners or some buildings you are managing are doing well in this area of strata meetings?

Karina Heinz: I am very fortunate to manage the 2012 award winner under SEA for community strata. That's a block of 103 in Redfern, the executive are very innovative in how they go about things. Anyone who's interested can certainly Google signature apartments and they'll see a variety of videos that they have prepared, they have a swap-shelf, they're very big on involving tenants in the building and I know with the new legislation coming and the involvement of the tenant representative various schemes are nervous about that and I like to say that when done well, it is an asset to the building.

This scheme long before, obviously this legislation was considered, involved tenants so when a tenant was disgruntled they had means through internet to convey to the executive committee their concern and on occasions that person has been invited to an executive committee meeting to discuss the issue.

They don't hang around for the actual decision making, they simply turn up and discuss the concerns, the issues, if they see a solution and so on and by having that input we have found that as a rectangle building that could have all sorts of issues, noise

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issues and so on they don't experience that because they are a community.

And this is very much borne out by involving the tenants in the building so when they have an issue, they feel consulted that there's means for resolving issues for the place where they live. You don't have to own a property to feel like a property is your home and so I have very much seen the difference after many years in strata where people have issues whether it's parking or noise or pets, with tenants in the building that this is being avoided by this owners corporation involving the tenants in our problem solving for the scheme.

They do things like on Earth Hour night they get everyone together. There's a notice up in the lift for weeks in advance telling people that there will be games up on the rooftop and they get there with their candles and they have a good time up there, having a bit of a party and playing games, they have Christmas in July event down in the foyer and also one at Christmas time.

So they're constantly engaging people – who want to be – as part of the community of the building. So part of it obviously is in the decisions and resolving issues in the building but it's that whole complete community aspect that comes from the multifaceted things that they do.

Amanda Farmer: And I think a key takeaway there Karina, which that building is doing well is instead of treating the meeting as a purely procedural matter something that we must do under the legislation we must meet and we must cover off these issues, they are actually using the meeting as a forum to engage other residents even if they are tenants, not necessarily owners, to say "hey we recognise you have an issue, come along to the meeting, the meeting is the right forum in which to discuss these issues and hopefully resolve them, we don't have emails flying back and forth. We don't have the strata manager under pressure answering phone calls and having to answer those emails let us actually get together face to face. We have a meeting coming up, let's sit down and talk about it and get it resolved quickly and happily" and it sounds like that buildings' got their finger on the pulse there?

Karina Heinz: Certainly and it doesn't take away for the need for what we have discussed earlier of procedure or having a good chairman. You're having a guest to a meeting, whether it's a tenant discussing a problem, it's no different from inviting an engineer or a lawyer to a meeting.

They've come to discuss a point with you and whether or not they stay around for the decision... I've often had both lawyers and consultants attend meetings, discuss things with the owners corporation but leave while the actual decision is being made, there's no need for that to be any different when a tenant attends a meeting.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, for sure. Okay Karina, what actions can our listeners take today to get started with improving their strata meetings? What are your tips or some quick wins?

Karina Heinz: The 2 things that we've already discussed: (1) is to prepare, take that 15 minutes to go through the agenda, work out that if you need any further information contact your building manager or strata manager, whoever is likely to be able to help you with that information.

(2) And the other thing that I think that we haven't quite touched on today is take that time when you're at the meeting not to talk to the person next you – people tend to sit next to someone that they are friends with or are like minded – and make sure that you listen to each person who is talking. Give them that time and respect to listen. I find that when as a chairperson I control that happening in my meetings so that people aren't talking amongst themselves the meeting is more efficient because we are not repeating things. You'll find that people often ask the same question and if they are not listening because they are talking to the person next to them, the meeting is now going to take longer.

Amanda Farmer: Yes.

Karina Heinz: And it's frustrating to those who have been paying attention that we've now got to over something not because you didn't understand, you haven't asked a question of clarity but because you weren't listening because talking you were talking to the

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person next you.

Amanda Farmer: I've seen that happen too. Yes, good tip.

Karina Heinz: They are very basic things but they do make a world of difference to how well a meeting runs.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, definitely. Now Karina, when I bring guests on this show I usually like to ask them a personal question and I often ask them about books but today I'm going to ask you who has inspired you in life and why?

Karina Heinz: I was recently at a seminar and it was a privilege to hear Imelda Roche who had started Nutrimetics many, many years ago now; a very practical person who I really appreciate. I do feel that in this day and age of many things being complicated, practical solutions are very much appreciated and what I found very interesting was that issues that we still touch on today, that we haven't completely resolved is women going to work and her particular case was the fact that her women, the women who worked at Nutrimetics, was that they needed to go out generally at night-time to make their presentations to the party groups that had gotten together.

And in that day and age when it was obviously the rare thing for the woman to work but also particularly to go out and leave their family at night, there was obviously some objection from time to time from the husbands, and she handled that very thoughtfully and tactfully by pointing out that their wives were not only getting a sense of fulfillment by what they were doing but they were also able to contribute financially.

And that meant that in a time when there wasn't so much income protection that should the husband not been able to work for a period of time that the wife would be able to bring in some income and provide some stability to the family whatever the circumstance that created it, it would already be a difficult time but not to have the financial pressure as well.

And she talked about as well how they had promoted women when they had done very well, how it had spread around the world and she is very inspirational to listen to and as I say take away practical thoughts of how to deal with things in business, whatever I'm dealing with now, chances are that she had dealt with it that point in time as well.

And I look forward to hearing her again in another event. I have spoken to her about attending another event where she can be a speaker and I look forward to hearing her speak again.

Amanda Farmer: Fabulous. I hope I get to see her as well and what a great overlap with our topic today, strata meetings and you talk about Imelda Roche talking about women having to go out at night and sell their Nutrimetics and we now have female strata managers going out at night attending strata meetings and there are still even today some difficulties associated with that, it's something that I've written about for Women in Strata on the blog there a couple of times: the unique position that female strata managers are in when they attend buildings at night and there are some in particular parts of Sydney that we might not necessarily want to be visiting at 7'o clock at night on our own, and wonderful that you had the opportunity to sit down and listen to Imelda Roche basically say that many years ago women were facing the same issues and how she was able to help them work through that, just as I hope we are today as a group of strata managers and strata sector stakeholders trying to make sure we can all do our best work anytime anywhere. So, thank you for sharing that inspiration Karina, I think that's an apt one for today.

Alright, Karina, how do our listeners find out more about you and is there anything you'd like to add before we say goodbye?

Karina Heinz: I'm very passionate about strata, I've done it for over half of my life now and so as I said earlier I like to stay current with the court cases that are precedent cases for our industry. I turn these into newsletters that we redistribute to our owners corporations and place them up on our website as a resource for letter reference.

I also have enjoyed sharing some of our schemes achievements in sustainable living. One of our schemes in Auburn was able to achieve 80% savings on their electricity and 40% on water so it's great to see schemes makes such a difference to their lives and

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pockets.

So we've recently prepared 2 Youtube videos that tell people a bit more about us, and that is on our website Progressive Strata.

Amanda Farmer: www.progressivestrata.com.au?

Karina Heinz: Yes.

Amanda Farmer: Fabulous! Okay, so our listeners can head over there to find out more about you. Thank you very much for your time today, Karina. I think we've got some juicy insights there for our listeners, for strata owners, for committee members and even some managers out there for how we might be able to run better strata meetings so thank you very much for joining us.

Karina Heinz: It's been a pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Amanda Farmer: Thanks, Karina.

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