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## YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 315. How to get unanimous approval for EV charging

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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.

**Amanda Farmer:** Hello and welcome to this week's podcast episode. I'm your host Amanda Farmer and my guest this week is Nathan Hage. Nathan is an owner and committee member at Zinc Apartments in Sydney's Alexandria. His building is a past participant in the City of Sydney Council's smart green apartments program, and this has resulted in some pretty dramatic changes around the building, when it comes to the installation of sustainability infrastructure. Including solar, and electric vehicle charging. In this chat, Nathan explains how Zinc managed to achieve unanimous approval for the installation of electric vehicle charging in its basement car park earlier this year. This is a vital topic to be discussing right now, as we move towards a more sustainable future and learning from the positive experiences of others is a great place to start. I'll take you over now to my chat with Nathan Hage.

**Amanda Farmer:** Nathan Hage, welcome to the show.

**Nathan Hage:** Thank you and hi.

**Amanda Farmer:** Wonderful for you to have agreed to spend some time with me here today, talking about a really important topic. There's been a lot about it in the media. You personally have been quoted on the good work that you and your committee have been doing in your community around electric vehicle charging. Let's jump right in Nathan. Tell us a bit about you and your community.

**Nathan Hage:** Well, a little bit about me, I've been living in Alexandria, almost at the Redfern of the area, since 2005 in this building, which was when it was built. Probably about the last seven or eight years, I've been involved with the strata community there. Essentially motivated by an opportunity to do more than I was from an environmental perspective. Obviously, being in strata, that can potentially spread across the whole of the building and all of the apartments within it, so that was my motivation.

Since I've been involved with Zinc Apartments, I've taken a reasonably broad view of what can be achieved and what order of things could be achieved, so I guess more of a holistic approach. So it's been positive. It's been positive. I think it's been an exercise in putting a lot of effort into keeping things very simple, which is useful for me. A lot of things in strata world can get complicated. Sometimes it's necessarily complicated. Oftentimes it's unnecessarily complicated.

**Amanda Farmer:** Nice way to put it. Do you have any special skills, Nathan? Are you an electrical engineer? I don't know what else, but is there something that uniquely places you to lead your community with these improvements you've been making?

**Nathan Hage:** I think if I were being kind to myself, I'd call myself a professional problem solver, so I do work, and have done for the last 20 years or so, in supply chain logistics, which is, for those that don't know, essentially is glorified, warehousing and transport. So lots of moving parts, each of them very simple, put them all together, there's lots of fail point opportunities and lots of people involved. I think though, that problem-solving skill is very helpful and I'm somewhat tenacious, I think, firm believer that persistence beats resistance every time.

**Amanda Farmer:** So personality traits there of you, identified by you, over professional skill, so owners might be concerned about not having the right professional, technical skills to take on a project like you have at Zinc Apartments. Not to worry. You just have to have the right personality or find the person in your community who does.

**Nathan Hage:** I think that goes a long way, and I think if you can take the emotion out of this, stick to what we're trying to achieve, begin with the end in mind, as a wise man once said to me, and keep the emotion out of it, then I think that's a really good place to start.

**Amanda Farmer:** All right. So Zinc Apartments, how many lots in your building?

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**Nathan Hage:** There's 45, with one exception. There's 22 one-bedrooms, 22 two bedrooms and 1 three-bedroom. It's a fairly simple building in terms of one lift, no swimming pool, no shared air conditioning, et cetera. It's a simple building.

**Amanda Farmer:** And how old is it?

**Nathan Hage:** 2005, the building was completed.

**Amanda Farmer:** And you have a strata manager, do you have a building manager?

**Nathan Hage:** Yes. We have a strata manager. We do not have a building manager. It feels like it's me sometimes, but we've got some... It's not all me, but there is a couple of people that certainly go the extra mile in the building.

**Amanda Farmer:** And how many on your committee?

**Nathan Hage:** There is five on the committee.

**Amanda Farmer:** Okay, great. I'm asking you these questions just to get a picture in the minds of our listeners here about just what your community is and where they can compare to their own communities. I agree with you, it's fairly standard building in Sydney. What prompted the decision to investigate electric vehicle charging?

**Nathan Hage:** So I guess, by way of background, there was a number of things that I got involved with via the City of Sydney Smart Green Apartments program, which it opened up a network for me. And certainly, some ideas, as I went to some of their presentations and consultation groups. At some point along the way, there was an offer for a study to be done that Brent Clark's business, Wattblock would do, which is essentially a detailed survey with findings. So this was back in 2017, just to take the temperature of residents in the building as to what their driver's interest future plans were for electric vehicles in the next few periods of time. So that happened back in 2017, so that was a really useful tool to, I guess, have a phased approach for planning and what that future might look like in terms of a solution, but more importantly, the timing of the solution with the expected uptake of electric vehicles in Australia.

**Amanda Farmer:** So bringing Wattblock in to do a survey, produce a report I imagine, on what your options and opportunities are and what the costs might be, is that how it all works?

**Nathan Hage:** Yes. It was less about the costs, more about what the opportunities were and what the scale of interest was going to be. I think, from memory, that was about two-thirds of the building expected to buy an EV, or their next vehicle within five years or so. So I think we're about there now, so it might have been a little bit optimistic, but lots of things have happened within that period of time, of course, but it was absolutely a guiding principle as to what the level of interest would be. But tellingly, it also said what the desired solution would be. Not for so much from a technical perspective, just more from a functional perspective and convenience point of view, so what do I mean by that? People wanting to charge in their own space is the quick answer.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes. And we're going to get into the particular method or model that Zinc Apartments have chosen to go with because there are a variety of different ways to facilitate electric vehicle charging in our residential apartment buildings. Just on that point about the predictions as to the uptake of electric vehicles and the need for charging facilities, I was tuning into the New South Wales government webinar, which was a couple of weeks prior to our recording this chat, and I will include a link to the replay under this podcast episode. And the New South Wales government has a plan in place to ensure that, by 2030, at least 50% of new vehicles being sold are electric vehicles. That's 2030. That's not too far away, and there's a lot of money, I think about \$500 million being put towards all sorts of initiatives programs to make sure that happens in this state. So I found that pretty mind-blowing.

**Nathan Hage:** And exciting at the same time.

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**Amanda Farmer:** Exciting indeed, and I did have, as a strata lawyer in this space and knowing what buildings are up to and what's concerning them at the moment and where their attention is directed, I did feel a little knot of anxiety in my stomach thinking, "Well, I don't know if our buildings are ready for this," and in that webinar, there's a discussion, very interesting discussion, about the need to address this issue now because, within the next 10 years, many of our buildings are going to have tenants who want to rent in buildings with electric vehicle charging facilities, purchasers who want to buy in these kinds of buildings. And we need to be ready for it if we want to maintain, if not increase, the value of our assets, and that's really whether you're a resident owner or an investor owner. What should be front of mind for you is being able to keep up with these changes, and I think the change is coming faster than any of us might have thought, except perhaps Brent Clark and Wattblock, who were telling you those figures five years ago.

**Nathan Hage:** Yes, indeed, so that was a big driver for us, and I think what we really wanted to do, what I really wanted to do was make sure that we catered for that future as much as we can, without painting ourselves into a corner with a single early adopter solution, for example, that might limit what we can do as a building for everyone involved in the future.

**Amanda Farmer:** So let's get into it. What exactly did you do? What has been installed at Zinc Apartments for electric vehicles?

**Nathan Hage:** I guess the first step was just an assessment on the building's capacity, so what spare capacity that the building had, which was, in our case, fortunately was plentiful. But I think it's also something that I think could be easily concerning to people, if you don't work in that area. I knew, in my head, there was a graph that said, "Okay, this is what happens at certain times of the day for the building as a whole, and then there's a line across the top of it, which says, 'This is the building's capacity.'" The gap in the middle is the opportunity for EVs and of the future consumption growth in the future.

So then as part of that then, it's, okay, well driving my next point was, as consideration should I say, was really what's going to be the most equitable solution and what's going to be the most cost-effective solution as well? I thought those two might be completely juxtaposed, but it turned out, that they weren't, so the solution that we've got in place is, essentially, it's called a flat cable solution, which in simple terms, is just a cable, which is genuinely a flat cable as well, that runs around the perimeter of the car park. It can work in whatever configuration of the car park, but essentially, it passes each of the spaces within the car park. Various controls, isolators and whizz-bangery that is back in the distribution board to manage the load.

But essentially that means that each of those spaces, at whatever frequency you can attach or install a charger, so you can have as many or as few chargers as you want to within the car park. So for me, that was great because the flat cable solution meant that we were set up for, potentially, every space, having its own charge in the future should we need that. If not, then it's a very cost-effective solution for what we've actually installed.

So in our building, there's 30 spaces. 24 of those are for residents and the balance are for visitors. So each of those spaces is serviced by at least one, but most of them have got access to two charges, with the length of the cables, so they're equidistant. So almost all spaces, they've got two charges that can reach them. So that was, I guess, meant that we weren't spending more money than we necessarily needed to on chargers, but it also meant that, what we could do from there, is expand as required.

I think importantly as well, the solution was a once we've got the infrastructure in place, which was paid for via a special levy, we actually raised that against each of the apartments that had a car space and the visitor spaces were picked up by the owners corporation. So that immediately removed some barriers for those that didn't have a car space as reasons to object, which I think would be quite philosophically unreasonable, but in reality, very reasonable.

**Amanda Farmer:** We will definitely come back to that. I'm interested in that from the legal perspective, for sure, but let me just get straight in my head, the technical side of things as best I can. So the owners corporation has taken responsibility for, essentially, installing the infrastructure, the foundational infrastructure, that would then allow an owner or a resident, in the future, to install the charger, another piece of equipment that then connects to the cable that the owners corporation already has there. The owner of the vehicle, who is wanting to install that charger, then takes on the cost of that installation, and am I right that it's quite simple then for their electricity usage to be separately metered to them through their own charger?

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**Nathan Hage:** Almost perfectly, right. Yes. So depending on which way we go, future additional charges, we can choose as to whether that's going to be an owners corporation or individual lot owners, so we've got that flexibility. At the moment, the 10 chargers that are in place are owners corporation. And with regards to the charging, all of the flat cable solution and, therefore, all of the chargers that are attached to it, they are all linked to the building common metre. We've got a third party billing solution, which means that each of the usage, actually just gets billed directly, so it almost works like Uber functionality. So if you've got the app, which links to the chargers, tap your app on the charger, and then that gets charged at a given rate. For us, we've kept it really simple and decided that, until we know more, we're just going to charge the shoulder rate and we can monitor that and we can change that, so essentially, it's a cost-recovery mechanism. We're not trying to make money out of it. It's just cost recovery, so we can adjust that depending on the patterns.

At the moment, it is only one rate that we can charge. I think in the future, it'll be smarter and it'll be dynamic charging, depending on whether the solar from our rooftop or others or nighttime consumption. We can maybe be able to charge it to avoid peak consumption, to manage peaks and troughs, but that's future considerations, which will come in, but for now, it's essentially the actual metering is taken care of via the third-party app.

**Amanda Farmer:** I've only just recently found out that this third party billing system exists for electric vehicle charging. I think it's just genius and solves a big problem for our residential apartments, where the owner can just be billed directly for their own usage through that third party, and the owners corporation doesn't have to worry about it if they don't want to.

**Nathan Hage:** Exactly. It also takes away some additional administration from some of our strata management friends as well, so it's very simple and very effective.

**Amanda Farmer:** All right, let's talk about the special levy to pay for this installation of the flat cable system, I think you've called it. How much did it cost if you don't mind me asking?

**Nathan Hage:** I do not mind you asking. For our building, it was \$30,000.

**Amanda Farmer:** \$30,000? Look, and that strikes me as less than I would've thought. We hear these figures banded about, \$100,000, hundreds of thousands of dollars. I imagine definitely some different systems, a whole of building solution as they call it, and rewiring the whole building would be much more expensive, but it's good to hear that for a building of 45 lots, that \$30,000 for a significant, I'd say, value add, I don't think is a huge sum.

**Nathan Hage:** No, no. So it worked out rather well. And we packaged it up at a general meeting with another solution, which was shared solar for the apartments, which I think was the bigger piece. We've already had solar for the common area of the building in some capacity there, but then this was... I think that was 24 kilowatts, and the shared solar for the apartments is an additional 75 kilowatts. So that was the first one and that's, again, the driver of being equitable. That was a really good solution from Allume based down in Melbourne. So that was the first and major item at this general meeting, and then the EV piece was a very useful add-on to that meeting. But collectively, for most apartments, it was \$4000 or \$5000, as a worst-case.

It was actually interesting, for a building that's pretty uncontroversial, in terms of strata and committee meetings, and usually, only the committee turn up, there was a tremendous turnout, which raised a few eyebrows in my world, because I wasn't sure which way it was going to go, because it gets pretty-

**Amanda Farmer:** I was going to say, turning out to vote for or against?

**Nathan Hage:** Well, it turned out that it was unanimously approved, both-

**Amanda Farmer:** Amazing.

**Nathan Hage:** Yes, which was staggering, so I did have to go and have a moment of quiet reflection afterwards.

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**Amanda Farmer:** Yes. Good on you. I'm sure a mountain of work ahead of that meeting to make sure owners really understood the value that was being added and what this all meant for everyone. Now you've said to me that a special levy was raised, but only those owners with parking spaces had to pay that levy. Can you fill me in on how your building was able to do that? Your answer might simply be, "We got legal advice and we did what the lawyers told us," if so, no worries. But if you've got any more guidance on achieving that, I'd be interested to hear it.

**Nathan Hage:** Well, we had a lot of conversations, as a committee, and then someone on ones, with some of the more vocal and interested parties. I suppose, by way of background, the committee's broadly split between, it's actually two residents and three investors, and overall, the building is about 50/50 between investors and live-in residents, for want of a better phrase, and so different skillsets within that. But I guess there's certainly a couple others that really have tried to think about how we can be most fair, so what did we want to achieve? And that was to be fair. We knew that we wanted to get to a point where we only wanted to be able to charge the infrastructure and the usage to those that were going to benefit from it.

The usage turned out to be very easy, as the metering solution that we've just spoken about, and then the infrastructure's like, well, okay, logically that is, if you've got a space, then that's an even share. It doesn't have to work on a units of entitlement basis, as a lot of things could do. So we said, "Well, this is what we want to do. We want to be able to divide that number by the number of spaces, and obviously, an allowance for the visitors, for the owners corporation." And then we went to put that through to our strata managers and said, "Look, can we do this?" And let them work it out. And the answer was yes.

In my limited experience, with strata managers, these guys are wonderfully boring and detailed, and I don't think they wouldn't object to me saying that, so they are detailed focus. So we just asked them the question, "Can we do this? Can we achieve this?" And the answer was, "Yes." And that's what was put forward at the general meeting.

**Amanda Farmer:** I'm wondering Nathan, if what happened when these funds were being raised, is that the funds were raised on the basis that this was an expense of the owners corporation that was not going to be shared amongst all owners in accordance with their union entitlement. Because there's a difference in our New South Wales legislation between what we might call a levy or a contribution, which can only ever be raised in accordance with unit entitlements and raised against every lot and an expense, which can in fact, be raised from only certain lots who are benefiting from an installation. I get asked this question a lot, and it's the advice that I've been giving to buildings in a similar situation. "Amanda, how do we do this without charging owners that aren't going to be getting the benefit?" So I'm not sure, but I'm wondering if that's the difference that your strata manager was attuned to, in terms of levies versus expenses.

**Nathan Hage:** That sounds incredibly likely as to what would've happened, so certainly, we got some very diligent people. One in particular on the committee, and he happily cross-references a lot of the discussions between strata and committee. We've got a good degree of faith in the diligence of our strata, so I think that sounds, technically, very, very likely. Yes.

**Amanda Farmer:** I do know it is a point of objection sometimes, as it may have been in your community that I don't have a parking space, I'm never going to benefit from this, my purchaser or a tenant's never going to benefit from this, so I think the message here is that there are creative ways to address that concern and to make sure that these kinds of installations are done in a way that's fair. And here's a great example.

**Nathan Hage:** Absolutely.

**Amanda Farmer:** Do you have anyone in the building that you know of yet with an electric vehicle?

**Nathan Hage:** There is one that's had an electric vehicle for about 18 months now. He was, naturally, very supportive of this, but I think also, we had a very pragmatic solution for him, just to allow him charge off the three-pin plug in the car wash bay, and we just said, "Okay, that's going to be worked..." Did some calculations, and based on data he gave us, "Okay, we'll charge you \$200 a year."

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**Nathan Hage:** But it was just a nice example of just being practical and simple because there's some horror stories in the press that we've heard that gets rejected out of hand just on some principle or other, so that was certainly one. And there's someone who will have one in addition to that in the next six to nine months as well, subject to the queues.

**Amanda Farmer:** So that is one way to approach it, dealing with this issue when it comes up and having those temporary solutions in place, while you think of, or raise funds, for the more permanent solution. Though, what I would fear, owning a building myself, would be that you don't know how many potential purchasers or tenants might want to charge their vehicles, move into a building that has these capabilities, and they're just disregarding your building completely because they've looked it up. They've looked in the records, they've asked the manager, the real estate agent, they've been in the property, they know you don't have charging facilities, so they walk away and you'll never know that you've lost that sale or the reason why your rental returns are lower than the building down the street.

**Nathan Hage:** Yes, absolutely. I think, off-topic, one of the things I'd love to see from a real estate perspective is where you've got the little logos, the number of bedrooms, bathrooms, and car spaces that there is, there's a little symbol for EV. There's a little symbol for solar. There's a little symbol for neighbours' efficiency ratings, et cetera. Whatever's really simple and effective, I'd love to see that, and I think that would actually provide some really valuable data.

**Amanda Farmer:** Oh yes. I really hope that's the direction that we're going in. Nathan, what do you think worked well in this process of getting this infrastructure into your community?

**Nathan Hage:** I think the fact that we actually engaged with the community, and I'm thinking back to 2017 when we started the process with the survey. It's like, "Okay, well, dear people in the building, we actually want you. We want your opinion. Here's a really effective avenue to do so," We got a pretty good response rate from that as well. And then from there, we actually demonstrated periodically through the minutes, that we were actually progressing what the solutions might look like as well. It wasn't something that was in every minute, so over all those years that would've been just tedious, but I think, what we did show was that, we're on a pathway as to what that could look like based on that initial input.

Then also we got a business case from Sustainability Now, which did some of the pre-work for us, for the solar in the building as well. Which actually, again, with an independent perspective, espoused what the benefits, pros and cons, for each of the possible solutions out there would be. So it is not just, "This is a Nathan Hage vanity project." It is actually, "Okay, these are the options out there. These are the pros and cons for them. Dear residents, whoever's in the building, please have a read avail yourself of the information, and then we, as a committee, are going forward with the most cost-effective and future proved solution, based from these possibilities that a third party has given us."

**Amanda Farmer:** So engagement, transparency, communication, all backed up by data. It's the perfect ingredients for a successful strata project.

**Nathan Hage:** Indeed, and honestly, I think I had to. In many ways, as we know, strata can be frustrating, but given the time that elapsed in that initial survey, the best solution presented itself, and it was actually quite new at the time. So had we as a building moved earlier, even by a matter of 6 to 12 months, that solution wasn't available. It was pretty common in Europe, but not over here, and I think from what I understand, this is the first retrofit installation of this flat cable solution in Australia, or certainly one of the earlier ones. So the timing in this case actually worked out really well for us.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes. And just to timestamp this for our listeners, when did you do the install?

**Nathan Hage:** It was March. March this year. March 2022.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes. Great.

**Nathan Hage:** And it was only two days' worth of work for the trade men.

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**Amanda Farmer:** Is there anything that you would've done differently now with the benefit of hindsight?

**Nathan Hage:** I've had some signage prepared for the car park in advance.

**Amanda Farmer:** Okay. Permanent signage?

**Nathan Hage:** Whatever's in approval. Whatever. No, just something that makes it more obvious of what's there. Doesn't have to be green painted visitor space or shopping centre type logic, but just to sign on each of the pillars, that's where the charges are, just to make it more obvious of what's where. But only a minor thing, but I think, overall, it's been really good.

**Amanda Farmer:** Nathan, I saw you were recently quoted in an article that appeared in the Guardian and I'll include the link to that under this episode. There was some discussion around the strata system, the concept of co-ownership and the democratic process working against electric vehicle owners, those who are interested in sustainability upgrades. Do you agree with that? Is it really hard to get these things across the line, and if so, what needs to change?

**Nathan Hage:** I agree to some extent. I think, most of us recognise that the building that I'm in, I think, was very fortunate, in terms of the scale and also the existing capacity in the building as well, so it meant that the solution from a cost base was quite low. But I think the bigger problem is more of a design piece, as in people just having their heads around who pays for what and how, on an ongoing basis. Strata theory and community living is beautiful, but not everyone's head is in that space.

I think the thing that is potentially hard is, like lots of things in strata world is, particularly asking committee or people when they're voting on these matters just to become pseudo-experts in, really, quite complex areas. Both from a strata perspective, but also from a solution point of view as well, and it's amazing how much effort people will put into these solar solutions, batteries, EVs to understand it, where they just wouldn't put that effort into a new gas hot water system, in terms of understanding what's possible? How is it shared? How's the cost work? You ask most people in strata, they wouldn't have a clue how they're charged for hot water depending on the solution.

I think the opportunity is for, what I would love to see, to make it more effective in strata world, is that from whatever level of government perspective, someone can actually come in and just actually assess what the building's potential is. Provide some solutions and say, "Look, these are the paths that you are building down, and this is what's technically possible from an infrastructure perspective and this is how to deploy it through your committee with the appropriate options for recovery of costs, expenses and ongoing charges."

**Amanda Farmer:** I suppose if you're in an older building where it just feels like there are many, many steps in the process before you might get to the stage where this is possible, being able to plan that out, being able to factor that in, to the 10-year plan, into your capital works fund plan. If it's going to be a particularly expensive process, simply because you've got a 1960s or 1970s build, then start saving for that. Start planning, but even just start talking about this being an important issue.

**Nathan Hage:** Yes, absolutely. I think recognising that this is a change that, depending on your perspective, is either here or is coming. And some people will love it and other peoples will hate the idea, but I mean, that's just human nature, but I think just recognising that it's there, and then what is best for the building and the people in it. In this case, I think that this is, it's unnecessarily emotive, but it is building infrastructure. To me, it's no different to lights in the corridors or the lift operating, and it's a newer development and thinking within strata, that's all.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes. I'm inclined to agree with you there. Well, thank you so much, Nathan, for spending time with us today and really just starting this important conversation. It's not one that we've had on the podcast before, and I'm sure we have many listeners out there, head-spinning, with a few new ideas and questions, of course. I can already sense the questions coming into my inbox about the specifics of how you did what you did, and I'll make sure that I can assist as many people as possible with more information. Maybe there's a webinar in the future for those who want more step by step guidance on this process, especially from the legal perspective when it comes to sustainability infrastructure, resolutions and by-laws if they're necessary. So thank you for

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sharing your experience and for championing your community, and can't wait to see what Zinc Apartments does next.

**Nathan Hage:** Well, thank you for the invite and thank you for the questions and yes, suffice to say, we do have plans for next, and it's going to involve batteries and heat pumps for the hot water. So I think that's where the conversation's going to now, but it's exciting times.

**Amanda Farmer:** Fantastic. Do you have a waiting list of purchasers yet? Can I get on it?

**Nathan Hage:** Oh. I think there must be, because we keep getting letters from the real estate, but honestly, I actually don't know how many people know in the building about this.

**Amanda Farmer:** Right.

**Nathan Hage:** Honestly, it's such a placid building, it's boring.

**Amanda Farmer:** Oh.

**Nathan Hage:** It's remarkable, honestly.

**Amanda Farmer:** Music to our ears. That's what everybody wants. A boring residential strata building.

**Nathan Hage:** Correct. But, honestly, if you take care of some of the simple things, then people don't have to get too excited about the big things, I think. It's a bit of a tactical play there.

**Amanda Farmer:** Good advice. Thank you, Nathan. I shall catch up with you next time.

**Nathan Hage:** My pleasure. Thank you. Thanks, Amanda.

**Outro:** Thank you for listening to Your Strata property, the podcast which consistently delivers to property owners reliable and accurate information about their strata property. You can access all the information below this episode via the show notes, at [www.yourstrataproperty.com.au](http://www.yourstrataproperty.com.au). You can also ask questions in the comment section, which Amanda will answer in her upcoming episodes. How can Amanda help you today?