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YSP Podcast Transcript: 387. How to Plan for Emergencies - with Leanne Habib and Megan Chatterton

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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, strata lawyer, Amanda Farmer. And this week I have not one, but two guests for you: Megan Chatterton and Leanne Habib.

Megan is the Chief Resilience Officer at the Owners Corporation Network, known in our strata circles as the OCN. She is a postgraduate research student at Macquarie University and has a deep empathy for the difficult circumstances strata residents often find themselves in. Anyone who knows Megan knows that she is passionate about supporting apartment communities to flourish.

Leanne is the co-founder and CEO of Premium Strata. She's a licensed strata and community manager, as well as a real estate agent with 27 years' experience. Having previously worked in various senior management roles with large strata and community agencies around Sydney, Leanne has cultivated a niche in Sydney's North Shore and Eastern suburbs in response to client demands that Leanne says, "Are not being met across the industry until now."

Leanne is also the CEO of Premium Building Management, a sister company to Premium Strata, offering onsite building and facilities management across New South Wales.

So that they can share with us the importance of being prepared for any type of emergency in a strata community. I'll take you over now to my chat with Megan Chatterton and Leanne Habib.

Megan Chatterton and Leanne Habib, welcome to the show.

Megan Chatterton: Thank you, Amanda. Its nice to be here.

Leanne Habib: Thanks, Amanda. Great to be online.

Amanda Farmer: It is fabulous to have both of you here with me. Not too often do I have two guests at the same time? So thank you for making time in your busy schedules to talk about this very important topic.

Now, Megan, you are leading a first-of-its-kind research project to find out how well-prepared Australian apartment communities are when it comes to emergencies and disasters. Tell me, why is this research necessary?

Megan Chatterton: Thank you Amanda and just a spoiler alert, I don't think we're very well prepared for emergencies and disasters. The world is a more uncertain place now than it was 10, 20 years ago and it's really important that for the one in four residents living in apartments, just as those living in detached houses, are prepared for hazards other than just fire. So the aim of the research is to ground truth what we perceive to be a lack of preparedness by asking residents and committees

Questions like what systems and protocols they have in place to respond to emergencies, what types of incidents they've had to respond to and how confident they were in doing so, who are they turning to for advice and is that advice adequate? Do you have a communications protocol that can be put into effect immediately or are you going to make it up on the spot once you've been evacuated and are out on the footpath? Do you have a lockbox for emergency services to quickly access the building to a systematically unwell resident or a person at harm from domestic violence? Is there a list of vulnerable people to direct responders to? And ultimately, who do you think is responsible for the aftermath of an emergency once everyone's been evacuated?

So it's easy to get people out of a building and the hard part is navigating what happens next and the hundreds of micro decisions that need to be made before residents can re-enter a building. So we'll be using this to develop free resources to encourage a

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whole of building approach to emergency planning.

What we don't want to do is to impose a costly and onerous regulatory burden on owners. So we just want to shift the mindset that somebody else will know what to do to one of more collective and shared responsibility.

Amanda Farmer: Leanne, from the strata manager perspective, what's been your experience working with buildings? Are they ready for emergencies and disasters?

Leanne Habib: Look, if I quote what the chairman of Opal Tower says, he will say, "We were never ready for that disaster." And I don't think anyone wakes up being prepared for an emergency, whether it's a major incident such as Opal Tower's because I am involved in Opal Towers or something, just having utilities out, no one's ever prepared for.

And I think it's something that we do now need to turn our minds to, it is becoming more and more often and unfortunately, it is part of reality that we do need to be prepared for it. But the short answer is no. Our owners corporations and our schemes are not.

And as these schemes get larger in size, they're going to become more of a disaster to manage because you're not just managing 6 or 8 apartments that might be in an emergency situation. You're now dealing with very large schemes and if I go to the Opal experience, they were almost 500 apartment residents.

And if you look at the Mascot towers, they're also above the 200 lots. So the schemes are getting larger. The emergency is becoming more and more frequent now, unfortunately, So something that we need to turn our minds towards and we're currently not.

Megan Chatterton: Leanne, I'll just jump in there. There's also some societal shifts that are introducing you and shared risks into our apartment communities. So, yes, our buildings are getting bigger and we've got more families with young children, more older people moving into apartments, people with limited English, limited mobility, and limited means to be accommodated elsewhere during a crisis.

We've got a mix of owners, tenants, and in some cases, social housing all coming together to live in these buildings that are taller and more technologically dependent than ever before. It's not a bad thing, it's just that we need to be more intentional in thinking about the practical implications that come with those shifts.

Leanne Habib: And challenges absolutely couldn't agree more.

Amanda Farmer: Now, I have been an apartment resident in the past. I am an apartment owner. And I've got to say when I hear you Megan talking about these issues to be aware of what you're looking into with your research, I'm not even thinking about these things. And Leanne, when you sit down to talk to buildings about emergency preparedness, are they surprised? I believe I am when I'm hearing about it?

Leanne Habib: Yes, look, I think now it's not so much a surprise because we're seeing so much of it in the media but I think a lot of them, going back to what Megan said earlier, almost feel like that they don't need to deal with it. It's almost, and I think what we're saying is you never think it's going to happen to you, you never think you're going to be in that situation. But the reality is you can be in that situation which is why you need to be prepared for it. And you know, the things that you need to consider is, and I say there's never one disaster that's going to be the same, you can never determine what type of disaster and emergency situation that you will be in.

But for me, it's mapping out the basics. The basics for me are: to determine the communication method. If you're in an emergency, how would you communicate to your residents? Determine that, map that out. If you're in an emergency, what experts or consultants would you need to rely on? Have a list handy so that if you are in a flust, you're in an emergency, you don't have to say, who am I going to contact? Who do we need? Have a list ready on hand. So if you are in that situation, you can refer to it.

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And like Megan said, the vulnerable, disabled, or any residents that can't get out in a hurry or an emergency should be listed and it's something that I've been saying that we need to consider perhaps during our annual fire safety statement process because as we all know as strata managers we don't always get notified of tenants which is a requirement but we don't always get that information.

And tenants can change more frequently than owners but owners also can change. So I think as we're doing our annual fire safety inspections annually, that is something that the technician should be jotting down. When they're going in an apartment resident, elderly, health implications and then have that list on the AFS because the annual fire safety statement needs to be displayed in a prominent location within the building.

And then let's use Strata Hub a little bit more than what we're using it for. Let's list the vulnerable on Strata Hub as well so emergency services can have access to Strata Hub and if they are caught to a site for an emergency the first thing they should be doing in my view is checking for that vulnerable list. So as soon as they turn up to site to assist them in an evacuation situation because that's something that scares me more to be honest. You're in an emergency, is there an elderly you know resident on very high floor or even on the ground floor and not you know they don't have the ability to get out and about during a situation like that.

Amanda Farmer: Megan, the survey that you're conducting that I understand is going to form the basis of your research has been live for a week or so now. Are you already seeing some trends come through those survey results?

Megan Chatterton: Definitely, yes. So there are two surveys. One we're doing at a household level and the other is at a committee level, so a whole of a whole building level. And so just a caveat that these are very preliminary results that I'm going to talk to now. From the first 500 or so responses. We've got a target of 2,000 which I think Amanda, I don't know how many members you have, but if half of your members do the survey we'll get well over the line I think.

So from the committee survey, only about 20% of buildings have an emergency plan or an equivalent, which is pretty much what we were expecting. Less than 50% have an up-to-date master contact list, and only 15% have a list of vulnerable people and pets. 50% of buildings have experienced a power outage, which in some cases has lasted more than 12 hours.

I'd be expecting this to become a more regular occurrence as we move into a hot, dry, windy summer with a failing electricity network in Sydney at least. 20% of buildings have a defibrillator, which is good to see, and around 16% of buildings are providing defibrillator training. Excellent. Problematically, and Leanne will expand on this, less than 40% of committees have copies of site plans and engineer's drawings readily available, which is pretty much the first thing I'd expect an expert would be asking for if they were to come in to assess an incident.

Now, in the committee survey, we've asked about the types of events that have triggered emergencies. One respondent told us about a truck that collided with an adjoining fence. Now while the truck didn't directly impact the building, it took out the local electricity distribution point and consequently, they've been without power since August. It's now November. Fortunately, they've been able to bring in a generator and this is refuelled every day. And I can guarantee this is loud and it will probably not cope with extra demand during summer peaks.

So we want people to be mindful of the flow on consequences of events that can happen outside their building. The Surry Hills Hat Factory fire earlier this year is another example. Fortunately, that fire occurred in an empty building that was waiting to be redeveloped. However, it took out the critical infrastructure to the four adjoining apartment buildings, displacing over 250 residents. Now this happened in May, two of the buildings got back in within a few weeks, but only one is only just gone into re-occupy after all those months.

And the logistics required to coordinate these responses are just mind-blowing. And to me, it kind of serves as a reminder why it's important to have a good relationship with your committee who are making these decisions. And also with your strata manager who is often going to be the first person to come in and start sorting this out on behalf of the insurers or whatever. I know sometimes

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strata might not just get a bad rap, but they do good in these situations, especially if they feel valued from the get-go.

And then, so to the household survey, bit of a mixed bag, 1% of households have got an emergency plan. Only 19% have a 72-hour supply of drinking water and non-perishable food. Less than half know where the evacuation meeting point is. And on the bright side, 70% of respondents have described the overall sense of community in their building as average or strong. 50% have access to informal communication platforms, and 60% have contact details of at least one neighbour that they could contact in an emergency.

So we've had lots of comments coming in along the lines of, oh my God, I had never thought of these things before. We must be having these conversations. And in this way, I'm really pleased that the survey itself has been a bit of a prompt to get committees and households to self-assess their readiness and start thinking about how to build preparedness into their everyday planning and management.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, I love that in collecting this data, you're all you're also promoting the need to be prepared. Listening to those stats and I acknowledge that they're preliminary. There's a lot of buildings that are not prepared.

Leanne, can you give us an example of a building that you might say is prepared that perhaps you're working with compared to one who is headed for disaster?

Leanne Habib: Yes, look, we're starting now to encourage our owners, again, going back to our earlier set, to sort of think about a map out a process, you know, communication. We hold a lot of information sessions for our residents during a time of crisis or even big project work and challenges, and that helps. As Megan touched on, you've got a language barrier, which is always an issue. And if I use Opal Tower as an example, we had a lot of foreign investors. English wasn't their first language, it could be a challenge.

Sometimes having the smaller groups with the ones that we're really struggling to understand also assisted. So I would continue to encourage owners corporations to start thinking about it but like I said no one wakes up out of bed ready for this. It's something that we have to start turning our minds towards and I really think that is mapping out the general process from now. Communication, what experts, having you know plans readily available and just ensuring as a community you're there to support one another because it is a big challenge especially when you're not expecting it.

Amanda Farmer: Megan, hearing these results, hearing the kinds of questions that your survey is asking, I'm sure we've got plenty of listeners who want to tell you what they think what's going on in their communities. Strata managers who want to share this survey with their committees and with their owners, which I strongly recommend. So how do we get involved? How do we access these surveys?

Megan Chatterton: Excellent. So both surveys can be accessed via the Owners Cooperation Network website at www.ocn.org.au. There are flyers that can be printed and posted in the common area of the building and they'll be, we'll have those in your show notes as well. If you're a strata manager or building manager please post on your socials, it puts something in your newsletter.

Pretty much any apartment building except duplexes, townhouses and villas can participate. And importantly, the household survey is for all residents, including tenants, who are often overlooked in these discussions. All of the surveys will close mid-December, so there's plenty of time. There's prizes, there's OCN memberships on offer, \$100 prepaid Coles-Meyer gift cards so please go to the show nights or to www.ocn.org.au.

Amanda Farmer: Perfect. Now, Leanne, are you doing anything in particular as a strata manager to make sure as many people as possible participate in this survey? You got some tips for our managers listening in?

Leanne Habib: Yes, absolutely Amanda, we've advertised the survey right across all our social media platform. We put it in our

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monthly newsletter, we continue to do the same, encouraging our database, our clients to get involved in the survey.

Because the purpose of the survey is to really find out how many people aren't prepared, to really highlight that it is a big gap, it is something we need to do and I think without those results it's very hard to get a good feel and number on where the gap is.

And we are definitely encouraging it, we're continuing to promote it and I think know for the strata managers that are listening I would do the same I would get some information from OCN I'd put it in your newsletters your social media and even table it at some committee meetings. And even if they're not participating in the survey I think my advice is let's get our committees starting to think about emergencies.

And again I go back to the basic map out and processes no one's ever going to be prepared for that emergency situation but let's as a starting point map out some of the basic processes.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, love it. Now, Megan, we've talked about the benefit of simply doing the survey and having our residents, our committees, our managers turn their minds to these issues. When that data comes in mid-December, you collate all of that, are there plans yet for what the next step might be for your project, for the Owners Corporation Network? Where is this heading if you're able to share at this point?

Megan Chatterton: Absolutely. So we'll be developing a range of simple resources, template resources for owners corporations to get together and do their own emergency plans and that will be released early in the new year. The survey will be publishing the results as broadly as we can.

Part of the broader project actually involves looking at the systemic barriers as well. As well as these surveys, we've also got a virtual stakeholder working group that is meeting to discuss what some of those high level systemic barriers and enablers are.

And Leanne has been very much part of that. We'll be meeting again in February to present the results and identify one or two actions that will move forward as a group. And that group, it's got the insurance sector, it's got building managers, strata managers, government agencies, community organisations, academics, a really good well-rounded perspective and as Leanne will attest, really strong interest as well.

Leanne Habib: Yes, absolutely and I think one of our biggest areas that we need to really have government officials look at is the legislation. I think, I know when I was going through the Opal and remember I came in after their major incident but have assisted them throughout after the major event is legislation.

You know when you're in an emergency you don't have that time or that luxury of giving notice for meetings or if you need to engage experts and you don't have funding available. You don't have that luxury of giving 30 days notice for levies due and payable.

So I think we need to have an emergency module in the strata Act which allows owners corporation with more powers, drive managers with more powers, committee members with more powers during an emergency so that you can manage the emergency and not have to be hindered or delayed or held back because of restrictions in our legislation. And that's an area that I strongly believe that needs to be considered in line with emergency planning. Because you can plan but your planning is always going to be around legislation. If we can get legislation you know more flexible in situations like this that's going to help planning a lot better in emergency situations.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, well, it's a great time, especially in New South Wales to be talking about this as we head into a period of reform and we have our state government telling us that there is more reform on the agenda and there's going to be more public consultation with future amendments to our Strata Schemes Management Act. So I'm so pleased that OCN is on to this and that you each have a seat at that table and a part of these discussions.

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Anything else that you want to add before we wrap up?

Megan Chatterton: I'll add two random things. The first is that the people in New South Wales should actually be quite pleased that you have the Strata Hub. The idea in the long run is that will actually interface with emergency services. So when the fires are off to an emergency, they will have information at their fingertips about a building and the structural things, but also as good as you know what goes into it so they will be able to know who's vulnerable if you tell them.

So that's a good selling point for the Strata Hub, I think that potentiality there. The other thing that I'm going to do Amanda is now Karen, the boss, might not be very happy with me but I think this is...

Amanda Farmer: Big Boss Karen's Stiles.

Megan Chatterton: Yes, I might get a slap on the wrist. We had our Strata Matters Conference last month and we had a panel session called Strata Disaster, which Leanne was on. And it sort of was centered around that story of Opal Towers, Shady Eskander the chair was part of that panel and Nick Burt from Facilities Management Australia.

And that's a really good narrative and lots of takeaway learnings from what that experience look like and the learnings that they took from it, what they'll do different. For example, they now have a contingency item in their budget, there's pre-approved expenditure in there, \$50,000 to get people into hotels, whatever they need to do.

Yes, so yes, some really forward-thinking things like that. So we'll have a link to that recording in the show notes as well.

Amanda Farmer: Amazing. Fantastic, that's amazing. Thank you very much Megan and OCN and Karen Stiles for offering that. Do you want to jump in Leanne with anything?

Leanne Habib: Yes, no, look, I think that was a great conference as well. I did attend and I think we had some very good speakers and good topics and definitely this was a hot topic. I think a lot of people took a few tips away from it. I'm hoping this survey will also, as you've already identified Megan, it's sort of prompted them that there is a need for this. And I think this is a great cause. Everyone should just jump on board and Amanda, thank you for having us and sharing it across your database as well.

And I think the more people that jump in, it's all about getting the results for everyone. We seemed to be going into the trend of strata community living and I can't see our schemes getting any smaller, they're definitely getting bigger and they're getting more complex. So it's more of a reason why we need to be forward thinkers, planners rather than being reactive. I think we definitely need to be proactive about a matter like this, it's becoming more and more of an issue.

Amanda Farmer: Well, thank you, Leanne Habib and Megan Chatterton for joining me on the show today. Listeners, get out there, get the survey completed. Links in the show notes for you, strata managers, take up Leanne's suggestions and share and share widely with your committees and your owners. I'll be sharing the survey as well for as long as it's open and we look forward to hearing the results. Thanks again. All the best!

Megan Chatterton: Thank you.

Leanne Habib: Thanks, Amanda. Thanks, Megan.

Megan Chatterton: Leanne, bye.

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 by the show notes at yourstrataproperty.com.au.