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YSP Podcast Transcript: 408. Get Ready for The High Life Expo

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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 this week, I am bringing you two guests, Amy Brand and Julie McLean.

Amy joins us from Let Me Be Frank, a sustainability agency focused on strategy, building culture and taking action. Amy has worked in not-for-profits, private enterprise and government and understands that each of these contexts comes with different challenges and opportunities. As a qualified facilitator, Amy's approach to consulting is founded on collaboration. She's less interested, she says, in telling you the answer and more interested in understanding your context and how to find the solution together.

Julie McLean has operated her own successful strata management business for over 18 years with ACE body corporate management while fulfilling the dual role of ACE national training manager to 120 franchised areas nationally. Julie also owns strata properties and serves on those committees. She is the immediate past president of SCA Victoria. Julie is also a previous guest of the show.

If you want to hear more from Julie McLean, I suggest you check out podcast episode number 355. That one's titled, We've Got to Get Our Act Together. Julie McLean on the Victorian strata sector. In that no-holds-barred discussion, Julie reveals how the system has failed at the point of purchase. The unreliable source of proof when strata properties are marketed for sale. Julie tells us that anyone in Victoria, Julie tells us that in Victoria, anyone with a heartbeat can be a Strata manager and why that has to change and why she's calling for specific training for compulsory managers. Great episode to check out and hear more from Julie.

I invited Amy and Julie to join me together this week to share with you the details of an exciting expo that's happening both in-person and online over the next month. That's May and June, 2024.

To hear more about that and how you can get involved, I'll take you over now to my chat with Amy Brand and Julie McLean.

Amanda Farmer: Amy Brand and Julie McLean, welcome to the show.

Amy Brand: Thank you so much, it's great to be here Amanda.

Julie McLean: Yes Amanda, and hello again.

Amanda Farmer: Pleasure to have you both with us and welcome back Julie. Amy we do know Julie as a past guest of the show but this is the first time that we are meeting you so I'll start here, tell us a little about your background and how you came to be serving apartment residents and apartment owners.

Amy Brand: Yes, thanks, Amanda. So my near obsession with sustainability in Strata, I would say, started back in 2014. I was living in an apartment in Thornbury in Melbourne, and at the same time, I got a new job at the City of Melbourne working in their sustainability residential programs. And of course, within the City of Melbourne, there's a huge amount of apartment buildings. And so I went on this huge learning curve to understand what's needed in these buildings, what the one of the complexities of trying to do sustainability within the strata context.

And I met Julie and others from SCA at that time, worked on a program called Smart Blocks, which was a national sustainability and strata program that was going at that time. And so that really caught my interest because it felt like there was a huge need in the community. And so I've taken that need and that interest with me through all of my jobs since then. And landing in the last

couple of years at Let Me Be Frank, a sustainability agency. We reconnected with Julie and the SCA team and started working on some sustainability and strata projects again, which has been fantastic.

Amanda Farmer: So is Let Me Be Frank focused on strata and apartment living or sustainability more generally?

Amy Brand: Sustainability more generally. So we did a lot of work in the local government but there's now this beautiful synergy coming up in Melbourne, and I know it's happening in New South Wales as well, that there's lots of local councils getting interested in supporting their strata communities to work within this space. So I just happened to be sitting in this perfect position where I had lots of relationships with local governments, relationships with Julie, and a real passion for this area of work to kind of restart some fires, I think, that needed to happen in Melbourne.

Amanda Farmer: Julie, with your years of experience in this space and hearing Amy say that she has seen there's a real need for this access to resources, to education. Do you see this on the ground working with owners and with owners corporations, this gap perhaps in knowledge and access to this information about sustainable solutions?

Amy Brand: Absolutely. We're seeing it interestingly with the first push is coming through with EVs. So people are turning up in buildings with an EV and they're just expecting it to be able to be plugged in. And of course that, and I'm even seeing it contingent on sales. So they're contacting and saying, well, if I can plug my EV in, I will buy this apartment. So there's various pressures that are coming in from that ground up even to initially people starting to sell not to be able to sell their apartments unless they can offer the ability to plug in with EVs of course the retrofit of these older buildings - I don't mean old old buildings, just buildings that aren't constructed today, they all have a retrofit journey and it's not just as simple as saying well let's just put a Power point in your car park and you know plugin that car.

So that's really interesting to see from the ground up because that gives the opportunity then to find the champions because one of the things Amy and I both found over this journey is that the journey to success is starting with that champion and often the strata manager is sitting in that spot because they're on the hotspot of saying "Well where can I plug my car in?" and you've got to tell them the bad news but you've got to say at the same time "Would you like to be on a subcommittee that's going to investigate this?" and then take it to that next level.

Amanda Farmer: So would you say Julie and Amy, something that we were talking about maybe only in recent years was a nice to have. So nice to have solar, nice to have EV charging, nice to have this sustainable solution is now moving into a need-to-have or a must-have because people are buying in with the expectation that they're going to be able to charge their cars. Strata managers are being asked questions. Well, I've got an EV. How do I do it? Do you think we're at that point now that we're kind of predicting but it's snuck up on us a bit?

Amy Brand: I think we're probably in the transition point now, I would say. I don't know if you would agree, Julie, but I think it's definitely heading in that direction, Amanda. Maybe we're not quite there yet where it's an absolute need, but the momentum is all in that direction, not just around EVs, but also around electrification and those kind of retrofits as well.

Julie McLean: Yes, and I would totally agree. All three levels of our government are not going to achieve their net zero or sustainability targets that they've all set for themselves unless they engage this sector. And I think that's becoming the realization, which is why we're suddenly seeing now, councils running with it, we've got grants, the Solavic grant is just, that's started to awaken in a lot of people's minds now.

And I just had a call from my cousin saying, we've got a new person in the block and they've looked at the solar grants and now we're going to look at putting solar panels on our building and she's really excited by this. So I think yes, the momentum is starting. It is a transition, a tipping point if you like that kind of says all the stars are aligning as they say.

Amanda Farmer: Amy, you are bringing to not just Melbourne, I'm going to say to everyone and you'll tell us how you're doing that. The High Life Expo. Can you tell us where the idea for the High Life Expo came from?

Amy Brand: Yes, absolutely. So funnily enough, it's an old idea that we are reinvigorating because I used to run something quite similar when I was when I was working for City of Melbourne and that ran for three years and just grew really quickly without a lot of resources. Once we kind of got the word out, it just grew and grew year on year. But funding situations change and the event didn't continue. But because of some of the reasons that Julie was just talking about, now seems like the perfect time to restart it and to work with SCA Victoria to put it on. So it was a collaboration between local councils, between industry bodies, as well as suppliers.

And yes, for all of those reasons, Soul of Victoria rebates because people are really wanting this information around EVs. People are needing to connect with each other to build that confidence, I think, in doing those retrofit works. So it just felt like the perfect time to get a collaboration together to drive the expo or a new version of the expo.

Amanda Farmer: So tell us about it, when is it happening? Do people attend in-person? Is there an online option? How does it all work?

Amy Brand: Yes, so there's both. So the main event is happening in Melbourne and apologies to other states. I've had lots of emails from people, particularly in New South Wales saying, can we have this in New South Wales? So we'll see what happens from here. But yes, 1st of June in the RACV City Club in Melbourne is the main event and we'll have six seminars happening that day. We'll have a supplier showcase happening that day. Julie, I don't know if you want to speak around the listening posts that you're hosting that day.

Julie McLean: Yes, so we've got, we thought it was a perfect spot to bring the idea that people could come and ask questions, but realizing, of course, they may be beyond just the sustainability questions, but we've got Jeanette Cochrane from OCN being there as part of the listening post. We've got the team at SCA being part of the listening post and we've got Facility Management Australia being part of that listening post as well.

So the three peak intersecting bodies are going to be there jointly to help and ask questions around, you know, like the role of a facility manager and, you know, the role of the strata manager in that sustainability and how owners can kickstart and, you know, start off and just general those sort of FAQ kind of area. And we'll be surveying and asking a couple of particular questions so we can get some data to start identifying the resources that are going to be best to support our cohort, be it again, owners, strata managers or building managers.

Amanda Farmer: Excellent. So it's a place for apartment owners, apartment residents, even those who are serving those people to come and learn more, connect with the service providers, grab some resources, some information, hear from some guest speakers.

Amy Brand: Absolutely. And also I would say there's a real value for people like local governments and the service providers themselves to come in and really learn more about each other. I think that's a real need. There are lots of amazing suppliers out there that are starting to focus on servicing the strata sector, but there's always more to learn. You, Amanda and Julie, know more than anyone the complexity of this space. And I think being immersed together in these topics can really help with that mutual learning. And we do have quite a large range of topics that we have on offer through the seminar series and through the supplier showcase, because we want to cover the technical aspects of sustainability like EVs, like solar, like electrification and efficiency, but we're also really conscious that to make good decisions, you need some kind of rapport within your building usually.

And so we've got sessions around building bonds and making good decisions as well. So really that human side of decision-making and resilience, because connected communities are usually stronger and more resilient as well. And so yes, we're covering both of those sides. And then we do have three online seminar sessions which will be available nationally. So there's one around waste and how apartment communities can better manage their waste. We've got one around green infrastructure. So how are you beautifying but potentially also cooling your buildings using gardens, balconies, whatever small to large spaces you have around your building. And then the final one is around that decision-making piece. So it's called Getting to Yes, Navigating good decision making in owners corporations. And I think that'll be a particularly juicy discussion.

Amanda Farmer: And as I understand it, the online sessions actually start before the 1st of June. You've got one of those coming up in mid-May, is it?

Amy Brand: Spot on, yes. The first one's Monday the 20th of May in the evening. And then the other two are happening after the expo. So there's the naturally cool happening on the 12th of June. And then getting to yes is on the 17th of June and all of that information is available on the website which is just highlifeexpo.au.

Amanda Farmer: highlifeexpo.au, I will make sure that link is in our show notes. So that's the place to go if you're going to be in Melbourne and you want to be there in person on the 1st of June, register for that day there. And you can also register for the online sessions as well. If you can only go to the online sessions, that's okay?

Amy Brand: Absolutely fine we encourage people to tap into the resource in whatever way works for them be it come to everything. Come to the bits that interest you. And we are also trying to build a library on the website of resources. So there's a resources section on the website. So if you can't attend, but you're really passionate about this space, we've centralized resources from across Australia around these topics specific to strata. So yes, we hope it can give a hand to anyone in Australia, no matter where they're at.

Amanda Farmer: Excellent. It sounds like a blast, let me say. And I do hope that you will be able to bring the Highlife Expo to other parts of the country in future. How much does it cost to these tickets that you're selling to this event?

Amy Brand: It's all free. We're very lucky to have amazing support from seven local councils and from a number of industry suppliers and from SCA Victoria. So we are able to put it on at no cost to the attendees, which I think is important because living in strata can be more expensive than people sometimes realise when they buy in and we just want to make sure everyone can attend, including renters, because renters are part of strata communities too, so accessible to everyone.

Amanda Farmer: Yes. And on that note, you've mentioned there renters and landlords, you know, investor owners. It's a conversation that I find myself having more and more about the importance of investor owners understanding and tapping into the value of these improvements. Because I think sometimes in strata, our investors can tune out a little bit. They're not there every day. The day-to-day running of the building doesn't necessarily concern them.

But as we were saying at the start, this is a new world order that we're entering now and property values are depending on these kinds of improvements. Julie, do you deal a lot with investor owners? Do you find that they're engaged or disengaged in this kind of discussion?

Julie McLean: I think it's like anything there's 50 -50. I'm an investor-owner myself personally and I make sure that the building is not only just discharging its lowest level, you've heard me before say this, Amanda, the legislation sets the lowest minimum standard. So, you know, we must do that, but it's also taking advantage of being able to set a goal and achieve something better.

And so sustainability, as Amy said in terms of connecting community, sustainability provides that wonderful opportunity, even with investor owners, to actually participate and be part of helping create better value for their investment. It's an avenue for them, and they have additional, again, tax benefits that help them. There shouldn't be any reason why they're not participating in this and helping improve their value.

But it is 50 -50 because a lot of our investors of course are mum and dad investors who are struggling in this cost of living crisis and just trying to get things across the line without having to add extra value to their investments. So it's 50 -50 in that camp.

Amy Brand: I think Julie that's a really good point in terms of where we're at with cost of living because I think the last thing we want to do through the expo is make people feel like they have to do everything now. We know there's a huge amount of pressure for resources when it comes to any kind of works in an apartment building. So we have also designed some sessions.

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There is a session called Better with Less that is looking at what can we do if you don't have a lot of budget but you want to start either in your own apartment or the building as a whole, where can you start to try and build a little bit of momentum around this without putting a huge burden and hopefully make a plan over time to improve sustainability?

Certainly, we don't recommend tackling everything at once. And yes, to think about it is a financial decision that you're making, both in terms of saving costs on electricity bills. Absolutely there is research that shows a sustainable apartment will sell for significantly more than a standard apartment. So I think there are benefits, but there's absolutely a balance isn't there in when to make the investment and reap the benefits.

Amanda Farmer: I think I saw on the expo website, Amy, that you know, you've been blown away by suppliers, those who are serving owners in this space, wanting to be involved in the expo. And it's sounding like this year's expo is well and truly better down, but others who want to get involved, who want to work with you in the future on this expo, whatever iteration it may take, do you encourage them to get in touch and have a chat?

Amy Brand: Absolutely. We do have an expression of interest form on the website and we have had, yes, we've been overwhelmed by suppliers and people wanting to be involved at Amanda. We've said to everyone, please, even though we're full this year, please let us know because there will likely be interim events or another expo next year. And it's just really great. I think you would agree, Julie, we want to know who's out there so that we can keep connecting people that are working in this space, be it suppliers, be it residents. Whoever it is, we know that we need to keep talking to each other to support each other.

Julie McLean: Yes, I read a blog over the weekend, interestingly, from a solar contractor and his words of advice was to in fact self-educate to all other sustainability providers. You need to self-educate, go to some strata things, take the opportunity and learn about the sector before you start playing in the sector. And so this is a perfect opportunity for our suppliers out there, even though you may not have got in this time to be a direct involvement with it, please come to the event because you'll get the opportunity to understand how things work in our sector and where you fit in terms of the process that we're gonna go through about how to get to yes kind of things. So it would be an invaluable experience whether you're a sponsor or whether you just come as a participant, you'll certainly get something out of it.

Amanda Farmer: And incredibly valuable for our strata managers and owners corporation managers as well, and something for them to share with their clients. If you've got a social media page, if you've got a newsletter that's going out encouraging your owner clients, your committee members, your residents to get involved, I think would be a great thing.

Amy Brand: Absolutely, I think the more we can get people from that are all working in the same building or living in the same building together you share the load too, don't you, if you're all kind of getting the same information together more hands is always better well usually better in strata I think rather than one person holding the holding the baby.

Amanda Farmer: Absolutely.

Amy Brand and Julie McLean, thank you so much for joining me today and sharing all the details of the Highlife Expo. You can find out more and register over at highlifeexpo.au. Even if you're not in Melbourne on the 1st of June, do get registered and participate in those online seminars. And I look forward to hearing from so many of our listeners how much they've enjoyed the Expo and hopefully seeing you in other parts of the country in person soon.

Amy Brand: Brilliant. Thanks, Amanda.

Julie McLean: Thanks, Amanda, great to see you again.

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.