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**YSP Podcast Transcript: 463 - The Best It's Ever Been: Why NOW is the time to act on strata sustainability**

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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 my guest this week is Brent Clark. Brent is the CEO and founder of Strata Energy Consultancy, Wattblock. Wattblock has assisted apartment buildings with solar batteries, EV charging and energy efficiency for the past 10 years.

Brent's worked with state governments, local councils, universities on strata sustainability. He also has experience as a strata committee member himself for the past 20 years. He has degrees in science, law and an MBA and is an accredited NABERS for apartment buildings assessor. Now, with so many opportunities available right now for our strata communities to access grants and rebates for sustainability upgrades, the landscape has never been more confusing.

So, I invited Brent onto the show to help demystify some of this for us. Helping you, or if you're a strata manager, your clients take the first step toward a more sustainable future. I'll take you over now to my chat with Brent Clark.

**Amanda Farmer:** Brent Clark, welcome to the show.

**Brent Clark:** Hi Amanda, great to be here.

**Amanda Farmer:** Lovely to have you back with us. We were just talking about how long ago was it that you were on the podcast. But we thought - was it last year? I think it might have been a little bit earlier than that. The years fly by.

**Brent Clark:** It could have been. It was either last year and then going back. Maybe I joined four or five years ago. I'm not sure as well.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes, I think so. Always lots happening in your space in strata, right? Which I think is a fabulous thing. What does the current landscape look like when we're talking about federal, state, local grants supporting strata sustainability? Give us the high-level summary.

**Brent Clark:** I think the way to describe it is Christmas time for strata from all three different levels of government. So federal. And this is when we're talking about sustainability, electrification, thinking about technologies like solar batteries, EV charging, heat pumps, water conservation. It just seems like every level of government is trying to help our strata population move forward with these projects. And so the smart people in strata are taking advantage of what's on offer.

**Amanda Farmer:** Good to hear. I want to talk about one big-ticket item in particular, Brent. The cheaper home batteries rebate. We're hearing about that across the country as homeowners, and I know our owners in freestanding homes are taking advantage of that. Is this relevant to strata? What does it mean for our strata owners?

**Brent Clark:** Look, the good news is that the federal cheaper home batteries is relevant to strata. And it really changes the game for strata installing batteries. So, if we think about it, the last 10 years we've been trying to help strata buildings get across and do solar and also, you know, do shared solar into the apartments, not just the common area. But it's been really rare for people to add the battery on. And that's because the batteries have been expensive. And then you've got extra, extra issues in strata that you've got to jump through.

Where are we going to put it? You know, is there a fire risk, all that sort of thing. But, federal cheaper home batteries - so the election promised \$2.3 billion to subsidise lithium-ion batteries came into effect first of July. And we've had an incredible uptake in the market of batteries since then. So, you know, for the first time ever, solar installers have reported that they're getting requests to install more batteries than solar systems.

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You've got the likes of Bunnings and Audi getting into the solar and battery game. And so it's just created a huge momentum towards getting batteries in the here and the now. And look, with standalone houses, what I think it's doing, it's really driving up the size of the solar systems that people will pair with these batteries. And that's an important thing. To get that cheaper home batteries rebate, whether you're a standalone house or a stratum, you need to have a solar system.

You can't just get the rebate on the battery and just install a standalone battery. So you have to have a solar system, either existing or a new one that you're installing at the same time, in order to get the federal cheaper home batteries rebate. And in the standard size battery that you might buy for a house, you know, it might have cost \$12,000 before, maybe it's going to cost you \$8,000 after the federal cheaper home batteries rebate. That's, you know, your Tesla Powerwall kind of battery.

But what we're going to find in strata people are, if they're going to do a battery in strata, they're going to go much bigger and push it up to the limit. So with the federal cheaper home batteries, you get the rebate up on batteries. You can install a battery that's up to 100 kilowatt hours, but you get the rebate on the first 50 kilowatt hours. And so that's going to drive a lot of stratas to do 50-kilowatt-hour batteries.

So quite a lot bigger than the batteries that were installed before. And yes, what else do you need to get this? It's a federal program, it's under the STC or Small-Scale Technology Certificates program. So it's the same program that the solar panels get their federal incentive from. It needs to be installed by a Solar Accreditation Australia (SAA) accredited solar installer. It used to be called Clean Energy Council accredited, now it's SAA.

So you've, you need to also install a battery that is capable of being connected to a virtual power plant. And the reason is if the federal government's going to give these great subsidies on the batteries, they want them to be connected up to the grid, and they've got to have the ability to be able to discharge during a heat wave, a power outage, et cetera, to help the broader community.

So that's something that South Australia has been the leader in virtual power plants, you know, with a program to roll out 50,000 batteries down there for a number of years and now all the other states are going to jump on board that. So yes, look, it's a fantastic boost, it's boosting solar, but it's made the batteries real here, now. Everyone's getting one. You know, a couple of years ago, people would put a 6.6 kilowatt solar system on their house. I've got a friend that's just signed up for a 20 kilowatt solar system with a 48-kilowatt-hour battery on a house.

**Amanda Farmer:** That'll keep you going for a while.

**Brent Clark:** Exactly. So, yes, so that's federal, cheaper home batteries coming to strata. Yes.

**Amanda Farmer:** Fabulous. I love it. So the short story is, if you're in strata and you've been thinking about solar, now's the time. If you've already got solar and you want to tackle on a battery, now's the time.

**Brent Clark:** Or if you've got solar and a battery, there was one strata building that had decent-sized solar and two Tesla Powerwalls, and they decided, well, we'll go bigger on the solar and add another four powerwalls and go to six powerwalls. So..

**Amanda Farmer:** Good idea. In New South Wales, we have the SoAR rebate. S O A R - Solar for apartment residents. Lots of buildings are taking advantage of that in New South Wales. What are the key criteria to qualify for that rebate?

**Brent Clark:** Yes, so solar for apartment residents. So it's important for everyone to realise the R is for residents. So the solar has to get to the residents, and it has to get to all of the residents. So it doesn't apply to your common area. Solar system that just powers the lift and the basement car park, and things like that.

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So this is a great program. It's, again, it's executed at the state level. And I should point out, because you've got listeners, you know, in other states as well. Victoria and ACT actually beat New South Wales with a similar program for solar that feeds into the individual apartments in strata. So I think the third round of the Victorian program's about to kick off soon. ACT last year, and then February 28th this year, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese actually launched the New South Wales version of the program.

So it's \$25 million in New South Wales towards solar that feeds into the apartments. And you can do it three different ways. So if you're a townhouse complex, you can get one solar installer to install an individual solar system on every townhouse. And I will say, provided that you're a class two building townhouse, if you're not a class two building, like if you don't have an underground car park, then you wouldn't be eligible as a townhouse.

So you can do it three ways. You can do individual solar systems for each apartment. You can do shared solar using a loom-energy and you've had Cameron Knox on and Will Anstee from Allume Energy before on the podcast. And if you've got an embedded electrical network, you can also do solar into the embedded electrical network that flows into the apartments, provided your embedded electrical network provider can do proportional billing to fairly share the benefit of the solar into the individual apartments inside the embedded network.

So the other criteria, they're targeting smaller buildings. So stratas with between 3 lots and 55 lots. So if you're a duplex, you miss out, and you didn't really need government assistance because it's a lot easier to get solar on a duplex if you've just got to talk to one neighbour. And then it caps out in New South Wales at 55 lots. So it's not for high-rise, it's trying to target that middle section of strata, and it's about reducing the cost of living.

And that's why they want to try and get it, say, New South Wales, not just in the eastern suburbs or the North Shore. They want to try and get it further out into the western suburbs and get it to Newcastle and Wollongong. So there's up interest from, you know, regional New South Wales as well. So, the other criteria for New South Wales solar for apartment residents, you need to get two quotes from SAA - accredited solar installers.

The payback time on the system has to be under 10 years. If you're doing a shared solar system, a loom, and you can connect your common property meter up, but you've got to make sure that at least 60% of the solar goes to the apartments and not more than 40% goes to the common property. If it only applies to strata titles. So if you're a company title or a landlord-owned apartment building, you miss out.

Another thing is they don't want you to do ridiculous oversizing of the solar system and generate too much solar that feeds back into the grid. So there's a limit of 30% of the solar that's generated being able to feed back into the grid. We have seen some people apply with really heavily tree shaded apartment buildings and we have seen like in a normal situation you might not have attempted solar and a few people have been knocked back just for very large tree shading because for them to make it meaningful they actually have to do so many extra panels that you know, the New South Wales government has declined some like that.

It gets a little bit difficult if you're in mixed use and you're in one strata scheme because it only applies to residential lots, and you have to work out as a community if you've got say four commercial lots on the ground floor and 20 units above and the whole system has to be paid for by the owners corporation. So what we recommend to people is if you've got that situation, do the heavy lifting on working out how to make it fair on the strata side.

Don't send it to the government and ask them to work out how to make it fair. But every residential lot needs to be connected, or you don't get the grant. And it has to all be paid for by the owners corporation, it can't be paid for by the individual lot owners, and you need the same solar installer to do it all at once. Connect it all up, and they're probably the main hoops that you have to jump through.

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**Amanda Farmer:** I'm interested in this mixed commercial residential, and how you would get around that owners corporation has to pay for it. Are there by-laws that we can make requiring the owners corporation to recoup, recover, credit the commercial owners? Somehow, in New South Wales, we have to levy everybody equally.

So we can't leave the commercial owners out of a levy. But if we are recovering the expense from the residential owners to contribute to this cost, and we don't recover it from the commercial owners, if we have a pretty solid bylaw in place allowing that. Is that the way you're seeing some buildings do this?

**Brent Clark:** Well, we actually saw one building go in, and their goal was, okay, we want to connect. In their case, they had an embedded network, which made it a bit more complicated, but they wanted to have the solar going to all the commercial lots on the ground floor and all the apartments.

And they attempted to negotiate with the New South Wales government that we want to proportionately reduce our grant funding by the unit entitlements. That was the aggregate of the commercial as a percentage of the total aggregate.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes. So that's what you mean by doing it at the government end? Yes.

**Brent Clark:** Yes. But I don't recommend that. I actually think the way you were proposing to do it, to do it inside the strata governance and work it out on your end, so that you just have a nice application that goes into the New South Wales government for solar sharing into residential apartments only.

And you fix the problem with the commercial lots inside your own strata governance. That is the way I would recommend people try. And, you know, whether it's some sort of user pay bylaw or some kind of.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes. Cost sharing. Is that because government sees a complex application like that and just says, "No, you're going to the bottom of the line."

**Brent Clark:** 700 other applications in the queue. It's a little bit too hard.

**Amanda Farmer:** Because it's quite an attractive rebate. I'm not sure if you mentioned this. How much maximum possible?

**Brent Clark:** Yes. So the headline number is 50% of the cost of the shared solar system, but you have to take off the federal STC rebate first, and then it's 50% of the remainder. But then there are a few other exclusions, like, for example, they don't give you 50% towards the home building warranty insurance.

And if you need a smart meter upgrade for the individual apartments, then they cap giving you 50% towards that, when the cost of the smart meters and the meter board upgrades reaches 10% of the total cost of the entire solar system. So, probably what people can bank on is about a 43% rebate.

**Amanda Farmer:** It's so technical, isn't it? I mean, everybody's listening - this is why you need somebody like Brent guiding you through this. And Brent and I are on video, and he's looking at me, and this is just coming out of his head. He knows this, he's not looking at notes, he's not Googling this. Brent knows his stuff. It's complex.

**Brent Clark:** Yes. Look, we've been down the rabbit hole, and then we won't dwell too much on this, but the way that the federal government sets up the STC incentive for solar under the ATO rules, it's inc GST. And then, you know, to apply for this grant to get through the there's a stage one application form and a stage two application form.

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And to get through the stage two application form, you might have to break what is like an accounting principle and maybe subtract something that's inc GST, which is the federal rebate from a cost of a solar system, which is ex GST. And you know, there's a few little things like that because there's an ATO ruling on how you treat GST on the federal incentives.

**Amanda Farmer:** Right, well, I'm leaving that one to you, Brent. You're going to work that one out. Now, I've heard you talk about the possibility of triple-dipping, stacking these federal, state, local grants. Is that a thing? Can our strata communities do that? What's your hack there?

**Brent Clark:** Yes, so we mentioned we've got incentives and rebates at federal level. So we just recap - what have we got up there? We've got like a federal SDC incentive on solar panels, and we got a federal cheaper home batteries rebate on batteries. And then when you drop down to the New South Wales level or state level. So New South Wales, ACT, Victoria, and I think there's another state that's on board with the solar sharing into the apartments.

You can't double-dip, say New South Wales. I mean, you can get both rebates, but you've got to take off the federal government rebate before you apply the state government rebate. And we've just been talking about solar and batteries. We'll talk about heat pumps in a second. But in New South Wales, we've got a few local councils that have local council rebates. And off the top of my head, I think it's maybe North Sydney, Lane Cove, Kuringgai, and Randwick.

There might have been a couple of others. But in some of those local council areas, you've got a raft of sustainability rebates that you can pick up from the local council. And typically they were for solar batteries, shared EV charge points, rainwater tanks, a double-glazed windows. It used to keep going even in North Sydney, like a small strata building, under 20 lots can get up to \$5,000 rebate on doing a main switchboard or a smart meter upgrade for the purposes of enabling solar or EV charging.

So if you take something like North Sydney Council, that's got a local rebate program, they've said if you're double-dipping on the federal end state for say solar or batteries, you can't triple dip into the North Sydney Council local rebate. But if you were, say, in Kuringgai or Lane Cove, you actually could potentially do some triple dipping on solar and batteries. And then when it comes to heat pumps, heat pumps are this new electrified way of heating hot water, and they use air temperature to slowly heat water and then some electricity.

So they're a great companion for solar and batteries. And we actually just saw. I'll give it a little shout out to 3 Abbotsford Cove Dr. In Abbotsford, being what I think was the first strata in New South Wales to retrofit common area solar, do a common area battery and then switch the gas storage hot water to electric heat pumps. And there's an owner in that building who drives an electric vehicle and has an induction cooktop.

So I only know of two people in New South Wales who live in strata who are 100% electrified at the current time. So when it comes to the heat pumps, solar and batteries, almost all the solar panels and almost all the batteries that you'll come across will be eligible for the federal and the state incentives. When it comes to heat pumps, you've got these huge lists. Maybe there's 900 heat pumps brands and models that you can look up online that are eligible, and they can be eligible like for federal but not eligible based on their branded model for state or vice versa.

So you know Mitsubishi Q-ton is eligible as a heat pump for New South Wales Energy Savings Scheme rebate, but it's not eligible for the federal SDC heat pump rebate. But then you might get reclaim energy or quantum, and they're signed in on both the federal STC and the New South Wales Energy Saving Scheme. So you can double dip there. And then when you go to your local council, if they've got a heat pump rebate, you can actually on a heat pump triple dip, federal, state and local.

If it's a brand and model that's eligible for the federal and the state. So you do want to get a professional. So the companies that do the processing of this are called accredited certificate providers or ACPs. And we've had like for example, a small strata go and put the heat pumps in, and they just called their local plumber and local electrician to do it, and they missed out on both the federal and the state rebate because they didn't know that you had to do it in advance.

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And after it's installed, it's too late. After it's installed, you can go to..If you've got a local council program, you've got 12 months just to fling your tax invoice in and get your little \$5,000 local council rebate. But if you want the federal and the state, it has to be teed up ahead of the install. So some people have missed out.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes, trap for inexperienced players there or those not getting the right advice. So that's a great tip. Thank you, Brent. Sustainability is front and centre. Certainly, in New South Wales, when we're looking at our recent reforms, we've got some new law around having to have an item on each AGM agenda dealing with sustainability. Increasingly, the last couple of reforms have tried to make very clear that banning sustainability options and sustainability infrastructure is a no, no.

So, when we're working with buildings who are recognising this, wanting to step into the future, what are your suggestions for them to try and get these projects, whether it's solar, whether it's EV approved and approved quickly, perhaps without too much pushback from those who might not be fully on board?

**Brent Clark:** Well, now that it's an AGM item from 1st July 2025 in New South Wales, so, you have to have a consideration of sustainability motion at every AGM. So we've already got a bunch of motions that people zoom through pretty quickly when they're on the time clock in their ag. But at least it's on the list, and it needs to be considered. And at what block, we did do a free sustainability compliance form that only takes about five minutes if someone wants to use it off our website to do that.

But people will think about it. They have to consider it from energy and water, and they've only got access to the dollar amounts of the utilities for that year and the previous year in the accounts. They don't actually have to look at the energy bills or the water bills, so they're not actually looking at the kilowatt hours, the megajoules or the kiloliters. One of the issues, I think, is that if you just look at the dollar amount from one year to the next, well, you don't know if the consumption went up or whether the pricing, everything just got more expensive, right?

But it's there, and as you said, we can't have these and sustainability by-laws anymore. And people have been reaching out to me. I'll just give you some examples, like hanging washing on balconies, erecting shades or awnings, you know, above windows or balconies, placing air conditioners or heat pumps on common property. Rooftop solar panels because they don't look good because the aesthetic..

**Amanda Farmer:** So you're talking about by-laws that ban these things?

**Brent Clark:** Yes. Fly screens in front of sliding doors. Because if you have a fly screen, it's more sustainable because you're reducing air con, dehumidification, fans, etc. I think building enclosures around balconies to build them in and create like sun rooms and different color. Like in townhouse estates, there were people that did by-laws that allowed solar and batteries, and they could be placed on common property. But, but they said they gotta be black or white.

And now I think if you want to have a red inverter or you want to have like a battery that has LED strip lighting on it and place it on common property, I don't think that sort of by-law would stand up that prevent red inverters or neon LED batteries. If you want to have like an EV charger behind your car space that looks like Iron Man, and the charger comes out of his Iron Man chest, I don't think people complain about.

**Amanda Farmer:** Is that a thing?

**Brent Clark:** Yes. And yes, and then in community associations you'll have these by-laws, like you know, on architectural grounds we can't have a solar panel within 50 cm of the edge of the roof line, just for aesthetics, and I think those sort of things will go. So yes, so we've got no anti-sustainability bylaws. We've got to consider it at each AGM. So that's your opportunity.

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If you're the greenie, the tinkerer, or the bean counter that wants to raise it and discuss it, get it onto the AGM and then also at every rework of the capital works plan, now you have to have some, at least some ballpark numbers for sustainability infrastructure. So you'll be going online at least looking for case studies or getting a sustainability report to try and firm that up..

So all positive things from the New South Wales government to drive sustainability into the stratas. My tip is if you're an owner, you've got to get to the strata committee. If you're sustainability-minded and you're on the strata committee, you need a teammate and so work out who is the person who can compliment you. If you can get that treasurer who's like the retired accountant or get that tinkerer who's the retired engineer on board, then you've got two - you create a subcommittee.

So we've seen this year more strata committees creating the energy or sustainability subcommittee. And if you've got two or three, then you've got a base to work from. It's hard to fly the flag solo and get these projects up in strata on your own.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes. And in my experience, sitting on committees, it's not because other committee members don't want these installations. They just don't want to have to think about it or to do the work. And as you've heard in this conversation, it's very technical. There's a lot to be across. If you want to do it properly, you want to make the most of the rebates, there's a bit of time to spend.

You know, I've been on committees where we said, "All right, yes, Joe, if you want to go and take the lead on that, go for it. Let us know how you go. Go chat to council, chat to Brent, come back to us next committee meeting. But between now and then, we've got too much on our plate, otherwise."

**Brent Clark:** Yes. I think the best strategy that's been particularly like Domain Real Estate site did the sustainability and property report. It's a long longitudinal study, and like, if you have a look at the latest one from May 2025, I think it's \$104,000 property valuation uplift per apartment is possible in Greater Sydney.

And then when you get into like Neutral Bay, that's like \$380,000 property valuation uplift per apartment. City of Sydney, \$384,000 property uplift per apartment. If you change it to the property valuation uplift argument, then you get the owner investors because that's something they really care about. And then it starts to make, you know, if our target is to get solar batteries, EV charging, double-glazed windows into every apartment.

And we've got 10 apartments. That's like in the city of Sydney, that's \$3.8 million of property valuation uplift we're going for. Well, maybe we can spend 100 grand on a shared solar system.

**Amanda Farmer:** Yes, makes a lot of sense. So how can Wattblock help, Brent?

**Brent Clark:** Okay, so we've got our website, and there are so many resources if you start digging on our website. Free solar readiness training course. Free EV charging readiness training course. We've got over 100 videos on our YouTube channel. We've got our free sustainability compliance form for people in strata in New South Wales. We've got our Electrify Strata WhatsApp group. Free to join and chat about all these things. We've got over 200 strata electrification enthusiasts in there.

**Amanda Farmer:** Love that.

**Brent Clark:** Yes. So jump in the chat and you'll get peer support, and then also remember all the council programs where you can get free sustainability reports. You know, look up your local council. There must be 10 different councils that will give your strata building a free sustainability report. Now they are still in the high-density areas of Sydney, but you know, hopefully that'll spread further across Greater Sydney as well. So that's how you get started.

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**Amanda Farmer:** Lots there to begin with, so your website is Wattblock? That's wattblock.com. Got it. We'll make sure that's in the notes, and I might get the team to pull out some of those highlighted resources that you've just spoken about there, Brent, and link to those ones as well, so they're easy to find.

**Brent Clark:** Sounds great. Amanda, thanks so much for having me.

**Amanda Farmer:** Absolute pleasure. Thank you, Brent.

**Brent Clark:** Okay, see you.

**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 [yourstrataproperty.com.au](https://yourstrataproperty.com.au).