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**PLUMBER TO
THE RESCUE®**

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INSTALLING INDIVIDUAL WATER METERS IN STRATA BUILDINGS

Water conservation is a vital issue; by reducing water consumption Strata owners can not only save money on water usage costs, but also help preserve our scarce water resources.

With this in mind, we are often asked to quote to install individual water meters in existing strata buildings. There are many advantages to having this done, however there are also many complications, and usually large costs, which the Owners Corporation should be aware of.

In this article I am referring to water metering by Sydney Water, because that is the main enquiry we receive from Strata Managers. However similar issues apply to the installation of private water metering systems, which the Owners Corporation would be required to purchase, install, maintain and manage at their own expense.

Some of the advantages of converting to Individual Meters are:

- The overall water usage usually drops substantially as occupants are directly responsible for the cost of their water usage and therefore tend to fix plumbing leaks and install water saving devices and tapware.
- Each lot only pays for what they use. For example the single resident is not subsidising the family of 6, or the residents are not subsidising the bakery in the commercial shop.
- Landlords are able to charge tenants for their water usage (when there is a water meter fitted).

For new multi-level strata developments, the path is laid out by Sydney Water for this water saving initiative. Currently it is optional for developers to prepare their building for individual cold water metering. However it becomes mandatory in late 2013/14.

For existing strata buildings, the path to individual meters may be fraught with problems. This is my analysis of some of the issues to be considered;

Sydney Water advises that existing buildings may be eligible for the fitting of individual metering providing all installations of individual meters are done to Sydney Water requirements for their wireless automated metering systems. This is replacing the current manual meter reading process.



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Therefore Sydney Water has strict guidelines that must be followed. These can be found in their “Multi-Level Individual Metering Guide” available at:
www.sydneywater.com.au/plumbing/meters/

There are usually considerable obstacles once a building is constructed to retrofit to individual water meters and the Owners Corporation should consider the following points:

- Where are the cold water supply pipes & isolation valves for each lot located? Because Sydney Water requires the individual meters be installed in an enclosure or cupboard in a common area, there can be considerable plumbing work involved in running new pipes between the unit and the new meter locations. This can be a major job, even more so if there are a number of risers, or supply pipes to each lot, such as to the kitchen, ensuite, main bathroom, and laundry.
- Often it will be necessary to open tiled walls, ducts, cupboards, floors, ceilings, etc, and there can be substantial associated building rectification costs.
- In some situations there is no practical or economical way to conceal the required water pipes, and they will need to be surface mounted, which can be unsightly.
- The new water meter enclosure must have provision for drainage in the event of leaks. This may involve installing plumbing drainage works and further associated building rectification costs.
- Space has to be found in common areas for the meters. Whether this is possible will depend upon the number of meters, the space available, aesthetic considerations and the plumbing work required to divert the pipes to the location of the new meters.
- Sydney Water will only allow individual cold water meters. If there is a common hot water system Sydney Water will not individually meter hot water usage per lot. Currently Sydney Water advises they will bill all the common usage to the Owners Corporation; this includes all the common hot water usage. This bill is calculated from the master meter less the individual meter readings.

To proceed, the Owners Corporation should contact their regular plumber who services the building to find out whether it is practically possible and economically viable to have the work done. Ask the plumber to give you a preliminary budget estimate. For difficult sites the Owners Corporation may need to engage the plumber to carry out some preliminary investigations before there is enough information to prepare the budget estimate.

If the Committee agrees it is worth pursuing they can call for quotations. However, in order to accurately quote the job, the plumber needs to know the location of the existing pipes. Often the pipes are not accessible and a pipe tracing service may be required to locate the main feed pipes to each lot. Therefore it will be necessary to pay a plumber to carry out detailed investigations and searches for the pipes.



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In some circumstances it may also be necessary to engage a hydraulic consultant to prepare the specification for the plumbers' to quote on.

With these issues in mind, the benefits to the lot owners and the environment of converting to individual water meters may be a sensible investment in the long term.

However, for the majority of strata sites it is not currently a practical or economical option.