

The "Better-Than-Like" Revolution

Integrating Sustainability into your 10 Year Plan

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This article is a continuation of the discussion introduced in Active's previous Inside Strata article, The Next Frontier of Australia's Energy Transition: Strata Living.

For many Strata Committees, the journey toward sustainability is often viewed through a narrow lens: solar panels and recycling bins.

A properly prepared 10-year plan should include a "Better-than-Like" replacement, rather than a typical "like-for-like" replacement.

For example, when the central hot water system is due for replacement in Year 7, the budget should reflect the cost of a high-efficiency heat pump system, not a standard gas boiler, which saves money in the longer term.

By integrating energy and water efficiency into the mandatory 10-year plan, Strata Committees can transform their buildings from depreciating assets into high-performance, future-proofed investments.

This article outlines a strategic approach to strata sustainability, highlighting the often-overlooked opportunities for efficiency and providing a clear three-year roadmap for transition.

Part 1: The hidden gems of strata sustainability

Several high-impact sustainability items remain "hidden" from the average owner's radar. These can significantly reduce a scheme's operational costs.

1. **Power Factor Correction (PFC):** Most large buildings pay for "apparent power" (kVA) rather than just "real power" (kW). An inefficient building draws more current than it uses, resulting in heavy demand charges. Installing a PFC unit acts as a buffer, ensuring the building draws power more efficiently. This is a technical "set and forget" item that can reduce common property power bills by 10% to 15% without changing a single lightbulb.
2. **Variable Speed Drives (VSDs) on pumps:** Often, pumps for pools, cooling towers, and water pressure run at 100% capacity regardless of demand. Installing VSDs allows these motors to slow down during low-use periods. Reducing a motor's speed by just 20% can reduce its energy consumption by nearly 50% (thanks to the Affinity Laws of physics).
3. **High-performance window films:** In older buildings, the "glass house" effect leads to massive heat gain. Ceramic window films can be applied to existing glazing to block up to 80% of solar heat gain, dramatically reducing the load on air conditioning systems while maintaining the building's aesthetic.

Part 2: The three-year strategic roadmap

Sustainability is a marathon, not a sprint. A phased approach prevents "levy fatigue" and ensures that each project builds on the success of the last.

Year One: The foundation stage (low cost, high impact)

Gather data and harvest the "low-hanging fruit."
You cannot manage what you do not measure.

- **The energy and water audit:** A professional Level 2 energy audit and a water leak detection sweep provides the roadmap and business case for all future investments.
- **Lighting and sensors:** Transitioning 100% of common areas to LEDs with motion sensors is the quickest win available. This usually pays for itself within 12 to 18 months.
- **HVAC tuning:** Rather than replacing systems, Year One focuses on "optimisation" – cleaning coils, replacing seals, and recalibrating thermostats to ensure the current system is running at its theoretical peak efficiency.
- **Water leak detection:** A single leaking toilet or a cracked underground pipe can cost a scheme thousands per quarter. Implementing "smart" water meters can alert managers to spikes in real-time.

Year two: The efficiency stage (medium cost)

Once the building is running "lean," Year Two focuses on infrastructure that enables future technologies.

- **EV readiness:** Rather than allowing "wild west" charging where residents run cables across garage floors, the scheme should invest in a backbone load management system. This ensures the building's existing power supply can handle multiple vehicles without a costly substation upgrade, or main switchboard upgrade.
- **Common area HVAC upgrades:** Moving toward high-efficiency heat pumps for common area heating and cooling.
- **Building sealing:** Replacing perished seals on fire stairs and plant room doors prevents "conditioned" air from escaping and maintains the building's thermal integrity.
- **Smart metering:** Installing sub-metering for major plant equipment allows the committee to see real-time data, identifying spikes in usage before they become expensive problems, including water leak detection.

Year three: the long-term stage (major projects)

Year Three is about future-proofing the asset.

- **Solar PV and battery storage:** With the foundation of efficiency laid in Years One and Two, the solar system can be sized accurately. Integrating battery storage allows the building to "load shift" – using solar energy to power common area lights and pumps overnight.
- **The "gas-to-electric" transition:** As gas boilers reach the end of their life, they are replaced with high-efficiency heat pump (renewable electricity) hot water systems.

Conclusion

By shifting the focus toward "hidden gem" technical efficiencies and following a disciplined three-year roadmap, a Strata Committee can transform a building from a mounting liability into a high-performing, cost effective, future-ready asset.

To be successful, these items must be included within the 10 Year Plan.

By matching sustainability upgrades with scheduled maintenance, the "incremental cost" is often minimal. Furthermore, the operational savings generated by Year One and Year Two projects should be tracked and potentially redirected back into the 10-year plan to accelerate Year Three projects.

Related reading: Active, The Next Frontier of Australia's Energy Transition: Strata Living https://inside.strata.community/the-next-frontier-of-australias-energy-transition/