

# **Building Community**

Presented by -

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### **1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

- 1.1 The concept of “building community” has its genesis in land subdivisions, but it is increasingly being applied to higher density strata titled properties. The land subdivisions referred to are those in parts of North America where the concept of community building first began to emerge in a relatively primitive sense in the 1920’s. Prior to that land subdivisions were totally unplanned and were often disjointed not only from subdivision to neighboring subdivision, but also among areas within subdivisions. In the 1920’s a new breed of land subdividers emerged who were focused on planning the subdivision, improving the land and controlling the way in which construction occurred (e.g. by enforcing set-backs and basic layout requirements). The planning involved the specification of patterns of land use, which were the equivalent of modern day land zoning. The developer’s target market was high end residential purchasers. At that time there were virtually no public land planning and subdivision standards in place and the developers set their own standards.
- 1.2 By the 1940’s the trend towards fully planned subdivisions had progressed from the high end of the market to the middle market. The drivers of this progression were the development of ways to produce affordable housing and the desire of young middle class families to own their own home in a planned communal environment. A by-product of the times was a move by the public sector to conventional town planning and the introduction of subdivision standards. The early public planning initiatives in the United States were clearly a response to the activities of the early “community builders”.
- 1.3 After the Second World War community building became the norm and public planning started to take the initiative. However, until this time community building still referred to the land planning aspects of land subdivisions, although it did involve the control of standards by the

imposition of land covenants. Eventually, a trend emerged where the physical communities created by the developer were organized under associations that assumed responsibility for owning and maintaining common areas that were available for use by residents. These became known as common interest subdivisions. This was the modern genesis of community building and is more in line with the concepts dealt with in this paper.<sup>1</sup>

- 1.4 Since the early 1960's Australian real estate developers have been regular travelers to North America, and the United States in particular, to monitor and copy trends. As a consequence, Australian real estate development closely followed what occurred in the United States. The concept of a "master planned community" was introduced in Australia during the early 1980's, although not in the pure sense. The early projects of this nature (such as Robina on the Gold Coast) were in fact "master planned subdivisions" in which all of the infrastructure and facilities were dedicated to local government and not retained as common interest property. Also, there was no organizational structure in the form of an owners association or body corporate.
- 1.5 During the early 1980's there were attempts to use the New South Wales *Strata Titles Act 1973* to create horizontal communities using subdivision techniques that were never intended by the drafters of that legislation. Around this time there was also a push from Northern New South Wales for the introduction of "communes" or alternate lifestyle communities (as a by-product of the "hippie" days of the 1960's and 1970's). A committee formed by the then New South Wales Department of Planning to come up with a titling system for communes was convinced by myself, with the support of a senior officer of the Land Titles Office, to broaden its scope to look at legislative mechanisms for master planned communities. The eventual result of the early work of this committee was the introduction of the *Community Land Development Act 1989* in New South Wales. This was not the first legislation of its type in Australia. Victoria had a *Cluster Titles Act 1974* that was a primitive forerunner of the broader concept of large scale master planned communities. The New South Wales legislation took the concept to a much higher level than the basic cluster title system.
- 1.6 Despite the availability of community titles legislation, its use was very slow to progress. Most large scale developers preferred to use conventional subdivisions based on a comprehensive

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<sup>1</sup> For a full discussion on the history of community building in the United States, see "*The Rise of the Community Builders*" by Marc A. Weiss (1987). The information in these introductory paragraphs was obtained from that publication.

master plan and regulated by extensive covenants on title or regulated by contract. The benefits were seen to be more flexibility for the developer and the absence of maintenance levies. To this day some developers prefer that model, particularly where the project is very large. However, as the benefits of a fully functional community become more fully appreciated, by developers and purchasers alike, the move towards community title product is accelerating. This follows the trend that has clearly taken hold in North America.

## **2. SCOPE OF PAPER**

This paper is primarily concerned with building community in medium to larger size master planned communities, most of which have a range of residential product and some non-residential uses (such as a retail or business precinct). However, many of the concepts and ideas dealt with in this paper can be easily applied to larger residential home unit communities.

## **3. WHAT IS COMMUNITY ?**

3.1 The mere fact that community title is used for a project and an owners association is established to administer the common areas does not mean that a “community” in the true sense of the word is created. The concept of a “community” in a land development sense involves a number of different components (most of which need to be present in order for there to be such a “community”). These components are -

1. Planning and titling laws
2. Physical layout
3. Facilities
4. Management structure
5. Management
6. Spirit and culture.

3.2 To date in Australia the focus has not been broad enough to accommodate all of the above components. To some degree the legislation in Australia is responsible. It has completely failed to recognize a role for an owners association or association manager to actively build a sense of community within a scheme. Yet what could be more important than ensuring that a residential development project or building is a pleasant place in which to live?

- 3.3 Fortunately, the real estate market has been leading in this regard. It is increasingly taking the award winning design and attractive buildings for granted and looking at what makes this place a good place in which to live. *“Why is this a better place in which to live than the previous one I looked at?”* Astute developers have been quick to respond and some have even marketed directly to this emerging demand. Association managers have been less enthusiastic. Their focus has been on the “process” of management and they often simply regard owners as something they have to put up with – they come with the job!
- 3.4 However, developers need to do more. They need to incorporate more physical facilities into communities so that the Association committees and managers have more to work with when trying to build community. They also need to “seed” the process by establishing the right technology to bring people together – such things as internet connections, web sites and an opening strategic plan. They also need to tailor management to the needs of residents rather than focusing on increasing revenues by selling management rights that in many cases add no value for residents. In return, they will be able to demonstrate to buyers that they are serious about delivering a community in the real sense of the word.
- 3.5 Managers also need to do more. There would be few managers in Australia who would see their role as being involved in the development of community within their projects. They see themselves more in the role of secretaries or administrators whose work is confined to that required by the governing legislation. They react to issues rather than anticipate them. A new breed of manager is required – one who will proactively and enthusiastically work with communities to develop the sense of community that this paper speaks about.
- 3.6 In the remainder of this paper I will look at ways in which the above components of community can be recognized and developed for the good of both the community and the developer.

#### **4. PLANNING AND TITLING LAWS**

- 4.1 Planning and titling laws are necessary to enable the developer to establish the master plan, progress the project (usually in a staged or sub-development parcel approach), constitute the owners association, create a “controlled environment” to stimulate value and enhance lifestyle and promote a sense of community among the project’s residents.

- 4.2 In the major jurisdictions in Australia the planning and titling laws go a long way to accommodate the development of master planned communities. However, many need improving in relation to very large communities where land uses need to be “locked in” at the beginning of the project, headwork charges need to be understood in advance, architectural and landscape controls need to be reinforced by local government, yet the developer needs to have a high degree of flexibility within the broad land use framework.
- 4.3 Another problem with existing laws concerns the lack of recognition of community building in the defined roles of Associations. Community building is not included as a role of an Association and the consequence of this is to deny the Association the right to spend money on this activity. To overcome this problem by-laws and community management statements must be used to expand the function of an Association to include community building. While this may be adequate as a temporary measure, governments need to address the problem by amending legislation and including this new role, thus opening the way for a budget line item of “Community Building Expenses”.

## **5. PHYSICAL LAYOUT**

The physical layout of a project must take full advantage of the topography and characteristics of the site and establish the most effective land use patterns. This is one aspect that is usually handled well by developers and their planners. However, good practice that promotes a sense of community is often interfered with by local government when it insists upon public access to what should otherwise be a private estate. This is often driven by ideological motives rather than sound planning practice. But whatever the drivers, it often creates a barrier to building community and compromises the effectiveness of the very concept of community in a real estate development sense.

## **6. FACILITIES**

Community facilities (such as recreational and health facilities and open space) can be either private or public or partly both. However, private facilities are to be preferred. They can be tangible (e.g. chattels or recreational improvements) or intangible (such as a web site or newsletter). Examples of facilities include:

- Gymnasium
- Spa and sauna
- Swimming pool
- Golf course
- Bowling green
- Croquet green
- Tennis courts
- Meeting room
- Common room
- Private bar and catering area
- Barbecue and outdoor dining areas
- Library
- Business Centre
- Social Club
- Children's playground
- Skateboard park
- Fruit and vegetable "common"
- Lakes and streams
- Boat park
- Open space with walking trails
- Riding stables
- Website
  - Intranet
  - E-mail addresses
  - Chat room
  - Resource centre
  - Marketplace
  - Management portal
- Newsletter
- Stakeholder surveys
- On-site services
  - Security
  - Caretaker
  - Association manager
- Community radio station
- CCTV service (including on-site production facilities)

## **7. MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE**

7.1 An appropriate management structure is important to ensure that the residents are "brought together" under a single structure that facilitates communication and interaction and provides the means for a broader development of a sense of community and well being.



7.2 Owners and occupiers within a particular building or “estate” must be connected in order for there to be a community. A body corporate or community association is the normal “vehicle” to achieve this connection. It provides both a need for and means of interaction among the various stakeholders within the community. It also provides the mechanism needed to control the facilities for the common good of the community and the organized activities and opportunities for social discourse. A conventional land subdivision or block of rental flats, where there is no organizational structure, lacks this essential ingredient to building community.

## **8. MANAGEMENT**

The management structure must operate in a way that is most effective to promote interaction and bring out the sense of community and well being. This is the human extension of the management structure – the management team. A structure that is not used effectively is not much better than no structure at all. The persons responsible for the management structure need to be committed to the concept of building community. They also need the necessary skills. The right “manager” will foster and build the essential spirit and culture within the community.

## **9. SPIRIT AND CULTURE**

Spirit and culture are the soul of the community and the essence of harmonious and caring relationships. They must exist at all levels within the community, including with its governors and managers and they are based on understanding, caring and tolerance. They bring about a sense of pride, wellbeing and belonging in the community, all of which are so important to a genuine communal environment.

## **10. HOW TO BUILD COMMUNITY ?**

10.1 There are many things that can be used to build community. Some are governance in nature while others are administrative in nature. The administrative side can be much more effective if it is preceded by good governance.

### ***Governance***

10.2 Governance starts with the legislation (i.e. the constitution) that regulates the body corporate or association. It is important that the legislation recognizes a role for the body corporate or

association in building community. If it does not, then constraints (such as the inability to apply funds towards communal objectives) will work against anything aimed at building community. It is very difficult to build community without some level of funding.

- 10.3 Once funding is available the governing body (i.e. the body corporate or the association) can develop a strategic plan (with both short and long term objectives) for the building of community. This will provide a clear direction and priorities for management whose responsibility it is to implement the requirements of the strategic plan. The governing body must itself be fully committed to the concept of building community before it can expect management to be fully committed. Both the governing body and management must work hard to bring the residents along with them (i.e. to foster commitment to the concept among residents). This can be achieved by involving the residents and giving them a sense of ownership of the process. In this way there will be less resistance obtaining funding approval when the budgeted costs of implementation become apparent.
- 10.4 One option available to the governing body is to form a sub-committee that takes on the responsibility for building community. That sub-committee can work with management to develop and implement a strategic plan or to simply implement a strategic plan previously adopted by the governing body. Such a sub-committee would normally be chaired by a member of the governing body who would report back to the governing body on a regular basis.

### ***Administration***

- 10.5 At the operational level, management will be expected to organize and manage a broad range of activities. Ideally, in larger communities, one person should have sole responsibility for implementation of the strategic plan for building community. That person can be appropriately supervised (e.g. by a sub-committee) and, depending on the work involved, may be supported by various other people.

## **11. STRATEGIC PLANNING**

The approach to strategic planning will depend upon things such as size of the community, available funding, skill sets of the committee members and the diversity of the community. For a larger community the process may proceed along the following lines:

1. A survey of the community stakeholders is undertaken to gauge their views and solicit suggestions.
2. The community manager (using the results of the survey) prepares an issues paper which sets out:
  - (a) the process to be followed to develop the strategic plan;
  - (b) an analysis (similar to a SWOT analysis) of the community, covering such things as diversity of residents, available communal facilities, availability of funds and likely response; and
  - (c) some suggestions for discussion.
3. The committee forms a “brainstorming” group of residents who have an interest in building community.
4. An outside facilitator may be engaged to lead a brainstorming session for the group. Alternatively, a member of the community or the manager can act as facilitator.
5. A brainstorming session is held, using the issues paper prepared by the manager.
6. The committee prepares a draft strategic plan using the material gained from the brainstorming session.
7. Focus Group Meetings of community stakeholders are held to develop and refine the strategic plan.
8. The strategic plan is endorsed by the committee and submitted to a general meeting for formal adoption.

## **12. SOME COMMUNITY BUILDING IDEAS**

- 12.1 The key to building community is creating a sense of belonging and spirit among the residents. Essential elements are communication and social interaction. Communication is important not only as a means of promoting spirit within the community, but also as part of the government and management processes. If the committee or its manager is not good at communicating in relation to formal and business matters, then dissatisfaction is likely to occur and this can quickly impact on other efforts aimed at building the spirit of community.
- 12.2 Social interaction gives residents the opportunity to get to know each other, form friendships and support groups. It simply involves the creation of opportunities for residents to get together and interact with each other. It follows that community building techniques rely heavily on promoting social interaction within the community. This social interaction is brought about by organized activities, which can generally be classified as active or passive.
- 12.3 Active activities for adults can include such things as:
- Golf days
  - Tennis tournament

- Swimming carnival
- Bike riding
- Car rallies
- Sailing days
- Walking and running groups
- Picnic days
- Baby sitting exchange
- Community service projects (meals on wheels, collections, mentoring, etc.)
- Organized philanthropy (e.g. funding a scholarship for an indigenous student).

12.4 Active activities for young people can include such things as:

- Camping and fishing
- Summer camps
- Skateboard competitions
- Sporting competitions

12.5 Passive activities for adults can include such things as:

- Card evenings
- Cocktail and dinner parties
- Barbecues
- Educational activities (covering such topics as photography, internet and computers, investing on the stock market, health and wellness)
- Book clubs
- Theatre parties
- Visits to galleries and museums
- Sightseeing tours

12.6 Passive activities for young people can include such things as:

- Concerts
- Movie nights
- Dance nights
- Computer games nights
- Book clubs

12.7 Clearly, the activities should meet the needs and interests of the residents. For example, a squash competition for residents of a retirement village may not attract the required numbers. Also, the type of activities should change as the make up of the community changes.

### **13. SUMMING UP**

A sense of community has to be created it will not just happen. Creating community within a large real estate development requires a governance and management structure capable of driving the process, adequate communal facilities to support a range of recreational, educational and social activities, good lines and means of communication, an appropriate level of funding and a genuine commitment by everyone involved. The process needs to be planned strategically and be tailored to the socio economic make up of the particular community.

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