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This is the text of the article from January 2005 issue of Strata Living magazine by Tim Cook of **Mr Washer Professional Strata Plumbing Services**

CONVERTING FROM A PERIMETER WATER METER TO INDIVIDUAL WATER METERS

To help the Owners and Managers of Strata Units understand the issues, I have written this article updating my original published in 2001 so you can be aware of all the aspects involved and can carry out a cost/benefit analysis of the proposal before proceeding.

With the current water restrictions and the heightened awareness of water usage, **Mr Washer Strata Plumbing Services** is often asked by Owners Corporations to quote the conversion from a perimeter water meter to individual water meters (Sydney Water provide the water meters at no charge). 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.

The advantages of converting to Individual Meters are:

- 1) 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.
- 2) 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.
- 3) Landlords save money as most residential leases require tenants to pay for their water usage (provided it is accurately metered).

Sydney Water Technical Services advise that their preference is for all units to have individual water meters. However due to the normally prohibitive plumbing and associated costs they have accepted a single perimeter water meter for unit complexes and this is usually the situation except for townhouse and commercial developments.

As water usage and resources is such a critical issue due to Sydney's population growth, it is becoming increasingly important to conserve water. Therefore it is conceivable that Sydney Water will in the future require developments to have each lot individually metered. This is becoming a more realistic proposition with new technology metering available such as **remote reading meters** which means that the location of the meter is not a critical issue and therefore the cost of piping not such a major problem.

However, currently Sydney Water offers no alternative to using their existing meters which normally must be installed at ground level in an external, accessible location.

There are usually considerable obstacles once a building is constructed to convert from a perimeter water meter to individual water meters and firstly the Owners Corporation should consider the following points:

- a) If there is a common hot water system it is not possible to have individual water meters because Sydney Water will only allow and read one meter per lot.
- b) In order to install individual meters, all the supply pipes to the lot need to be run through the meter. This can be a major job when there are a number of risers, or supply pipes to each lot such as to the kitchens, ensuites, main bathrooms, and laundries.
- c) Sydney Water normally requires the water meters to be located on ground level in an external, accessible location. Whether this is possible will depend upon the number of meters, the space available, aesthetic requirements and the plumbing work required to divert the pipes to the location of the new meters.
- d) Often it will be necessary to open tiled walls, ducts, cupboards, floors, or under floor areas and there can be substantial rectification costs.
- e) There maybe a legal requirement to create a By-Law for the proposed location of the meters.
- f) Usually, despite the best intentions of an Executive Committee, once the full details and cost of the proposal is put to a general meeting, the proposal is not passed.

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 pay the plumber to carry 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 and common area taps or fixtures, therefore it will be necessary to pay a plumber to carry out detailed investigation and searches for the pipes. The results can be given to the other plumbers to quote on the job.

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

Installing individual water meters is not feasible for the majority of sites. However if it is a viable consideration, the benefits to the lot owners and the environment can make it a sensible investment in the long term.