

Major strata reforms to allow tenants seats on executive committees

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Tenants in apartment blocks and townhouse developments will be able to demand seats on their executive committees, under the major revamp of strata laws planned for next year.

Fair Trading Minister Anthony Roberts said the government wanted to encourage a greater level of tenant participation in strata communities, in his announcement of the reforms.

"In schemes where more than half the residents are tenants, we will give them the opportunity to have a non-voting representative on the strata committee," he said.



"Makes sense to involve tenants": Robert Goodall. *Photo: Steven Siewert*

However, there will be limits on this spread of democracy: "Tenants will not be given new voting rights and the owners corporation can choose to exclude tenants from deliberations on certain matters," he said. Those matters could include sensitive financial information such as levy payments or discussions about breaches of bylaws by other residents.

The proposal has been welcomed by representatives of tenants in NSW.

"Increasing the opportunities for tenants to participate in their strata communities is important and reflects the reality that more and more people in NSW are renting for life," says Martin Barker, tenants' advocate with the Inner West Tenants' Advice and Advocacy Service.

Architectural technologist Robert Goodall agrees tenants can make a huge contribution to the running of an apartment building. As a member of the executive committee at the Signature Apartments in Redfern, he has involved tenants in the running of the building and helped to set up a social media site for owners and renters.

"It makes perfect sense to involve tenants," Mr Goodall said. "A tenant should feel comfortable in the building and feel that it's their home too, then they'll be there for the longer term and are more likely to look after the unit and the building.

"That makes a more pleasant living environment for everyone; you won't get a high turnover of tenants, which is good for us and for the investors, and the whole building will benefit in terms of both atmosphere and value."

Tenants have come to play a huge role in the 91-apartment block, making up about 40 per cent of the volunteers in the rooftop community garden and coming up with ideas in helping the building work better. "On our Facebook page, we invite both owners and tenants to ask questions, make suggestions or receive information about what's going on," Mr Goodall says.

"Also, tenants are welcomed at our EC meetings to come and watch, and speak."

Last year, the building's strata managers, Progressive Strata Services of Bondi Junction, won Strata Community Australia excellence award for the work they had done in the Signature. Strata manager Karina Heinz said the number of disputes in the building had dropped dramatically since tenants became more involved. Also, levies had been kept down by switching from paper to electronic messaging - exactly as the planned changes to strata law proposes.

But there is one potential drawback to tenant representation.

"In some buildings, I imagine it might be hard to fill a place that might be reserved for a tenant," Mr Goodall says. "Some tenants just might not want to be involved."