

PRIME OPINIONS

Homing workers seek lifestyle roosts

ONE of the questions asked at the 2001 census was: “Did you work from home today?” More than 438,000 workers or 5.3 per cent of the Australian workforce ticked “yes” to that question.

But this figure does not truly reflect the community of white-collar workers who choose to work from home because it includes farmers who work on their property.

The inclusion of the mining community also skews the figures: fly-in fly-out miners at home on an off-week are “in work” while “at home”. Some forestry workers also don’t leave home when they go to work.

I am interested in workers who have sufficient job flexibility that they can choose to either commute into the office or work from home.

How big is the work-from-home group (let’s call them “homers”) and is it growing? Do homers cluster or are they scattered? Is this a new and untapped niche market for lifestyle property?

When farmers, miners, forestry workers and fishermen (the boat may be their home) are excluded, the number of non-primary industry workers who worked from home on census day (Wednesday August 7, 2001) drops to 321,000, or 3.8 per cent of the defined workforce. This figure is up from 293,000 five years earlier where it equated to 3.6 per cent of the workforce.

The number of Australian homers grew by about 5500 per year during the late 1990s. Writing in *The Washington Post* earlier this month, academic Joel Kotkin says home-based workers’ numbers in the US increased by 23 per cent during the 1990s.

My figures suggest this market in Australia expanded by 10 per cent over five years in the late 1990s, which places it squarely in line with the American trend.

But these numbers pre-date several important shifts.

The “seachange” surge from 2001 deposited a flotilla of 50-something baby boomers in coastal hideaways within a two-hour drive of capital-city CBDs.

From about this time there was also greater acceptance of the lap-top, dial-up technology that truly facilitated telecommuting.

And, more recently, each year it seems employers provide staff with ever more flexibility in how they may deliver their labour: rostered days off, flexidays, staggered working hours, job-sharing and straight up work-from-home options.

Job growth is also manoeuvring the workplace in favour of those occupations that can be delivered from home rather than from a factory.

An analysis of job growth between the 1996 and 2001 censuses shows that white-collar jobs in management, accounting, marketing and administering powered ahead, while demand contracted for blue-collar skills such as fitting, welding and sewing.

This structural shift is now being hastened by globalisation factors that subtly transfer factory jobs from Australia to China.

The bottom line is that since the turn of the century there have been a series of economic, technological and cultural changes that have made it easier for employees to work from home.

I have accessed unpublished data from the 2001 census to identify those postcodes containing the highest proportion of people who work from home (see table).

This analysis shows that Sydney’s Palm Beach is this nation’s telecommuting hot-spot with 133, or 19 per cent, of workers performing from home. Five years earlier, this proportion was 12 per cent.

The southern bank of the Hawkesbury River is something of a magnet for homers, since there are several hotspots nearby, including Pittwater’s Bayview and Lovett Bay, which have between 11 and 13 per cent



Flea change: Locations such as Pittwater’s Lovett Bay are becoming a magnet for the work-from-homers



Escaping the rat race to work from home is now becoming widely acceptable

| HOME ALONE | | | | |
|---|-------------------------------|------------------|----------------|--|
| Proportion of workers working from home 2001* | | | | |
| National rank 2001 | Place | Work at home no. | Work at home % | |
| 1 | Palm Beach | 133 | 19.4 | |
| 2 | Bay View (Mona Vale) | 175 | 13.1 | |
| 3 | Lovett Bay (Mona Vale) | 123 | 11.8 | |
| 4 | Mount Tambourine (Gold Coast) | 152 | 11.7 | |
| 5 | Maleny (Sunshine Coast) | 252 | 11.3 | |
| 6 | Buxton (Mona Vale) | 184 | 11.0 | |
| 7 | Cundinup (Augusta) | 57 | 10.9 | |
| 8 | Daylesford | 99 | 10.6 | |
| 9 | Noosaville (Sunshine Coast) | 292 | 10.2 | |
| 10 | Red Hill | 117 | 10.2 | |
| Australia | | 312,250 | 3.8 | |

*Excludes primary industry workers and postcodes with less than 500 workers Source: ABS Census 2001, KPMG Property Advisory Services

of workers working from home. Mt Tamborine in the Gold Coast hinterland has the highest proportion of homers (12 per cent of all workers) in Queensland, while in Western Australia the telecommuting hotspot appears to be Cundinup near Augusta south of Perth (11 per cent).

Most South Australian telecommuters are perched in the Adelaide hills at Birdwood (8 per cent), while in Tasmania there is a

thought I’d work from home today.”

It is quite likely that many of these locales today would have up to one-quarter of the local workforce working from home; by 2020 this proportion in selected towns might be half. What would Daylesford, Mt Tamborine and Palm Beach look like if one worker in two worked from home?

They would evolve as colonial outposts of the CBD or as distant satellites to, say, the

Collins-Street sun. Local residents would not see themselves as Daylesfordians; rather they would see themselves as Melbourneans living in a distant galaxy.

And if you are a groovy metropolitan type telecommuting up in “them thar hills” then you have the capacity to fund a grand provincial residence from a CBD income stream. But not only that, you expect big-city sophistication to be laid on in the local high street: you simply must tell your city friends about the sweetest local baker who makes baguettes “to die for”.

As delightful as a slap-up counter tea at the local hotel sounds, you would nevertheless prefer the cuisine of a city-styled chi chi restaurant.

And so it is that in these homer towns there is a seismic culture shift now under way and which is capable of further development. Telecommuting as a lifestyle choice is accelerating and yet I cannot cite a single developer targeting this market the way others have pursued — or rather stalked — the life form now famously known as the seachanger.

Homer towns are easy to identify: they are cute, they are pretty and they blossom near freeways that lead to capital cities.

Perhaps it’s time to suggest to your partner a romantic motoring weekend up in the hills for some rest, recuperation and a spot of rampant reconnaissance.

Bernard Salt is partner property KPMG, bsalt@kpmg.com.au

Divide and conquer rules in body-corporate disputes

MANAGING a body-corporate dispute can be like herding cats. Over the years I have overseen a number of body corporate disputes, in Melbourne and Sydney.

They are a very distinct kind of animal.

A great many of them have been multi-unit development disputes, often to do with building defects. They are costly, frustrating and can take years to resolve.

Some of the worst disputes concern waterproofing.

In one matter, a waterfront development boasted magnificent fluorescent stalactites in the car park!

Melbourne is not known for its caves, and while there was every chance that the stalactites could have become a local tourist attraction, the unit holders were not enamored of the notion.

In another block there was a unit with a very healthy crop of fungi and toadstools.

The growths were very much reminiscent of what is typically found on farms after autumn mists and a healthy dumping of cow manure.

Waterproofing disputes are probably the worst because it is difficult to determine the precise cause. Expert opinion varies and the cure is often elusive.



Kim Lovegrove

Body-corporate disputes can be difficult, costly and frustrating

The biggest problem confronting those charged with resolving these types of disputes is that strata owners often differ about the need for litigation.

Typically, there will be some units that are far more afflicted by given defects than others. One can have a multi-unit development where 75 per cent of the apartments suffer from a construction malaise, but the balance of units are soundly constructed.

The happy minority is rarely fond of contributing towards a fighting-fund levy.

Some members are more financial than others, and some have the will to fight while others do not.

A canny opponent knows this and knows how to capitalise upon the waxing and waning of the body-corporate beast.

A deft adversary will use the Band-Aid approach by effecting low-cost repairs.

This is often a “fob-off” that is not designed to go to the root of the problem. Rather, it is cosmetic, superficial and designed to test the resolve of the body-corporate entity.

The Band-Aid approach is also designed to exhaust the limitation periods for the initiation of legal

proceedings. All is fair in love and war. The Band-Aid approach is also an absolute waste of time, because the only way to resolve a dispute is to litigate — get it mediated or resolve it at trial.

So what should you do to expedite the resolution of body corporate disputes?

- Establish a robust fighting fund.
- Appoint the appropriate technical experts, briefed to generate a comprehensive defects report.
- Appoint construction lawyers well versed in body-corporate law and dispute resolution.
- Don’t waste too much time on pre-litigation antics. The sooner proceedings are issued, the closer one is to the end game.
- Be prepared for a long haul and a tough fight.
- Have a body-corporate sub-committee invested with carriage of the fight.
- Know what the case is worth, what it’s going to cost and don’t give up.

Kim Lovegrove is principal of Lovegrove Solicitors and is President of the Victorian Chapter of the Australian Institute of Building lovegrovesolicitors@bigpond.com



High drama: Body-corporate disputes can be costly

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