

Building tropical lifestyle

A CD launched by Thuringowa's Mayor, Cr Les Tyrell, at Riverway on Monday night lists 206 objectives, solutions and tips on tropical housing. IAN FRAZER reports

CRITICS like Dr Doug Goudie call them McMansions. These supersized homes with monstrous garages mushroomed through the US in the 1980s and flourished in Australia a decade later.

Now they line the coast from Melbourne to Port Douglas, massive monuments to owners with mind-numbing mortgages.

You can find examples along Ross River, on the slopes of Castle Hill and at Bushland Beach.

New-home buyers in Townsville might not identify with the McMansion ethos, but builders and real estate agents say 80 per cent of them want four-bedroom houses with double, lock-up garages and ensuite plumbing.

This trend is examined in *Breakthrough Ideas for Sustainable Urban Development in North Queensland*, a CD launched by Thuringowa's Mayor, Cr Les Tyrell, at Riverway on Monday night.

Dr Goudie, a tropical environment studies expert at JCU took part in some of the discussions which yielded the 206 objectives, solutions and tips on tropical housing listed on the CD.

He was a member of a 'sustainability, education, synergies and innovation' focus group, led by Professor Chris Berndt, of the JCU School of

Engineering.

In all, 100 engineers, builders, architects, developers, real estate agents, financiers, social scientists and health experts participated in 55 workshops organised by the 10 focus groups convened by Thuringowa City Council to plan its 'green village' at Kelso.

Cr Tyrell said on Monday that council was about to call for expressions of interest from developers for the sustainable village project, to be built on a 1.1ha site at 1320 Riverway drive, in Kelso.

He expected work would begin early next year on 11 or so houses.

He paid tribute to Sandy McCathie, the project co-ordinator, for her vision of guiding builders and developers towards producing affordable housing suitable for the tropics.

Ms McCathie, an environmental management expert who worked in Adelaide and the Pilbara region of Western Australia before starting business in Townsville three years ago had been a 'wonderful asset'.

"Our intention is for the project to be a catalyst for sustainable housing an urban design in the region," he said.

Ms McCathie, director of ecoSAVVY – a sustainability consultancy company – and vice-chair of the North Queensland Chapter of the Australian Green Development Forum, said the focus on industry enablement rather than consumer awareness was a 'completely new model'.

The marketing and sales focus group led by Justin Stainton, of Stainton Master Builders, investigated ideas for 'commercially viable, mainstream acceptable and cost-competitive sustainable housing and urban development in NQ'.

Their sustainable housing product had to be cost-competitive, within traditional

mainstream housing prices, \$300,000 to \$400,000.

They suggested the necessary savings could be made by reducing land area per dwelling, reducing internal floor area, using low-cost construction techniques and 'tropical-design principles'.

For example, these principles could be applied in clusters of duplex, semi-detached houses, with book-end outside walls facing east and west to minimise heat gain, cost-effective shading and ample ventilation to catch prevailing breezes.

They see a market for duplex-style housing in 'well-designed, active an interesting open space.'

"Increase dwelling densities and overcome issues with privacy and noise by moving from detached housing forms to dwellings with shared walls (with good acoustic properties)," they suggest.

Analysing housing sales in the North, they observed that buyers seeking greener, more sustainable homes generally looked for 'Queenslanders'.

The typical new home bought by 80 per cent of the North Queensland market had four-bedrooms, ensuite bathrooms, a double lockup garage and variations for personal taste.

"Current housing trends include having a pool, home theatre and airconditioning to the entire house," the group found.

"Concrete masonry detached houses essentially mandate a need for full airconditioning to be provided as most concrete masonry homes are uncomfortably warm without airconditioning – especially at night.

"Tropical design is not currently prevalent as a trend for mainstream housing.

"Neither is sustainability. Perhaps one or both could or will



become predominant trends for mainstream housing in NQ.”

People buying large four-bedroom homes usually had the financial security of having already owned a smaller one.

“There are not presently many first-home buyers buying new homes at the moment – they simply can’t afford it,” the group noted.

They believe everyone would like to be able to live in a more sustainable home, given a choice, but concede that there are no incentives at present.

They found that institutional lenders were not able to provide any extra access to finance for homes designed to yield savings of even \$3000 per annum.

“Operational costs – that is reduced running costs – are not currently recognised by financiers or valuers in the current market,” they say.

But in future energy and water-efficient houses with reduced running and maintenance costs are likely to gain in capital value.

Another of the focus groups,

specialising in land development and urban design, suggests that spiralling land prices will increase demand for housing on smaller blocks.

This group, led by Neill Bennett, of Urbex, a residential development company, gives the following data on district land sales:

“In 2007 the rising cost of new housing and land in Townsville/Thuringowa has impacted on affordability of new housing in region,” they say.

“In 2007 the ratio of value of land compared with construction costs increased to 50 per cent land, 50 per cent dwelling construction.

“In 2000 the ratio was 30: 70 land to house, typical land prices close to Thuringowa Central in April 07, \$143,000 for a 520 sqm lot at Kalynda Close, and \$159,000 for a 650 sqm lot and \$102,000 to \$295,000 at Willowbank.

“Increases in land component of new housing costs can be attributed to increases in development costs, infrastructure charges, taxes, regulation and

delays for approvals.”

But Dr Goudie sees no abatement in the demand for ‘McMansions with air-conditioning’ in the short-term.

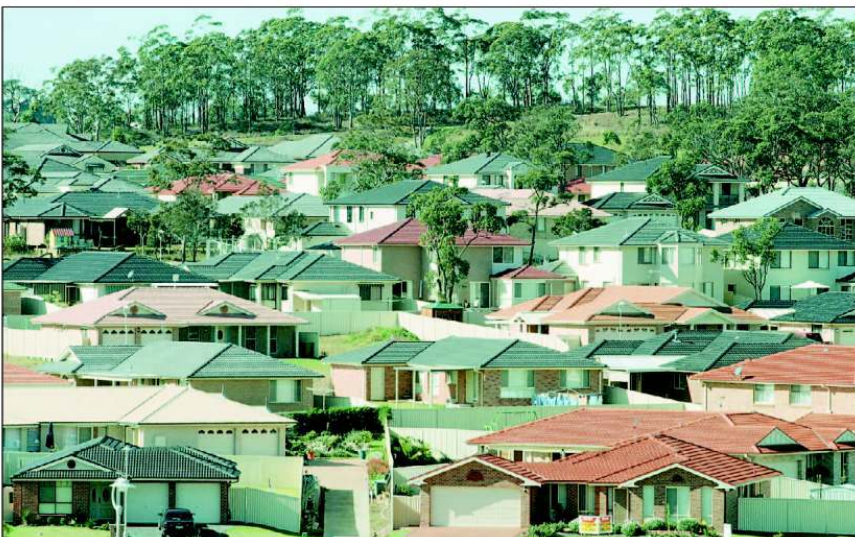
Contacted for his view on Thuringowa City Council’s initiative and a move by Townsville City Council to introduce a sustainable building code, he said he welcomed any encouragement to cut reliance on airconditioning.

“Anything that government does that legitimises people actually trying to do something a bit different, that reduces the fossil fuel footprint, has to be good,” he said.

“To say it’s OK to have a big breezeway will shift perceptions about what’s normal, about what a new home should be like in the tropics.”

The resource CD, *Breakthrough Ideas for Sustainable Urban Development in North Queensland* is available from Thuringowa City Council.

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Sandy McCathie