



May industry briefing from Owners Corporations Victoria

The digital television revolution may be heralded as a new era, but the death of analog transmission will have wide ranging consequences for strata property owners and occupiers, writes Owners Corporations Victoria general manager Rob Beck.

The Australian Government is following the global trend towards digital transmission, which markedly improves picture and sound quality, as well as providing greater program choice. This 'digital switchover' is being likened to the introduction of decimal currency in 1966. From 1 January 2010, analog TV signals will be shut down in metropolitan areas and from 1 January 2014, analog transmissions will cease throughout Australia.

The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) estimates that currently just two in five Australian households (42 per cent) are watching free-to-air digital television services, with digital-capable televisions accounting for only a quarter of overall stock of TV sets in Australia.

The majority of Australians will purchase a new television or digital receiver to be ready for the digital switchover. But for those living in strata units and apartments, analog antennas and cabling will render new digital televisions useless.

There are around 250,000 owners corporations comprising two million lots Australia wide. Time is running out for these multi-dwelling buildings to upgrade signal and amplification equipment and be digital ready. This may be as simple as replacing the antenna, but in a looming problem for the majority of buildings built before the simulcast of analog and digital signals in 2001, being digital ready may require complete re-cabling at significant cost to owners and Owners Corporations. Some estimate these costs to be in the order of \$300 to \$400 for each unit. Other properties will incur significantly greater costs. For example, a pilot study completed by government authority Digital Broadcast Australia on the Gold Coast found a third of apartment buildings required an upgrade costing \$10,000 to \$20,000 to pick up digital transmission.

With eighteen months to go, approximately half of the Owners Corporations in metropolitan areas are not ready for digital. To make the deadline, hundreds of properties per week will need to replace the antenna, head end [amplifier] and/or cabling to ensure digital signals can be received and transmitted to residents.

It is imperative that owners and Owners Corporations plan for the digital switchover now, allowing for their sometimes lengthy approval process and to ensure adequate funds are available to pay for the conversion work. Specialist technicians are needed for installation and they are in high demand, with many in the industry warning of long delays as the digital switchover date approaches. Failure to address this issue now will leave strata property residents literally 'off the air' when the plug is pulled on analog.

In late March 2008 the Australian Government announced \$1 million funding over two years for research into digital reception problems in multi-unit dwellings with a shared TV antenna system as part of its strategy to ensure that Australia is ready in time for the digital switchover. Communications Minister Senator Stephen Conroy has said that the ability of people in multi-unit dwellings to pick up digital signals was a critical issue to be examined by a taskforce on the digital switchover reporting to him. He has invited a representative from the National Community Titles Institute, of which OCV is a member, to join the taskforce to ensure the challenges faced by strata properties are taken into account.

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