

# A brighter future



by Julie Gatehouse

**Julie Gatehouse takes a look at sustainable housing – the theory and the reality. What sort of home and lifestyle do you want for yourself, your kids and future generations on the Sunshine Coast?**

**A** reinforced turf driveway that sucks in rainwater to irrigate surrounding plants and reduce run-off. A solar-heated pool that helps regulate the air temperature inside a house. A high-ceiling timber home that meets 9.5 green stars yet costs just \$150,000.

These are just some of the ways Coast home owners and builders are starting to inject sustainability into our lifestyles. The first two are part of a private home worth more than \$1 million that was recently completed at 10 Culbara Street, Mooloolaba. The third is a new display home on show at Mitre 10, Court Road, Nambour.

In practice, sustainability measures can be incorporated into any home, of any age or size, on any block, in any neighbourhood. In principle, housing sustainability is about local communities striving to better match their accommodation needs to their overall environmental, economic and social needs.

It's a concept that Sunshine Coast Regional Council intends to enshrine in its regional planning scheme. In consultation with government, industry and the public (get your submission in by December 7), the council is investigating methods such as strategic location of new housing, renewal of existing neighbourhoods and diversity of dwelling types, costs and designs.

It believes sustainability is inextricably linked to the goal of affordable living (see box 'Why affordability is an issue'). While many people desire a big house on a big

block on the beachfront – and can afford their dream, many others would be happy in a townhouse in a community full of facilities and transport to cut their cost of living. The council's manager of social policy Robyn Douglas says it's about providing smart choices for home buyers and renters of all incomes, but goes well beyond house prices and finances.

"At the council's Our Place, Our Future roadshows people tell us they love the way they're living," Robyn says. "That's great, and we're not asking residents to make changes they don't like. We're asking them to think about all the different stages of their lives. As circumstances change, for example when you're a uni student or an empty-nester or retired, you may not need the traditional big home. We need to ensure plenty of attractive alternatives are available." (See box 'Housing alternatives'.)

Robyn says sustainability and affordable living are vital for future generations. "I ask mums and dads, 'Do you have kids trying to get established on the Coast? Can they afford it? Where will your grandkids be able to live in 2031, when our population is forecast to be half a million? What sort of lifestyle do you want them to have?'"

In its Affordable Living Discussion Paper, one of the council's aspirations by 2031 is to reduce the ratio of detached housing on the Coast from the current 76 per cent to 53 per cent) of all stock. However, Robyn says that's just one factor among many in a gradual process to improve sustainability. The goal is for more people to live within their means, making whole neighbourhoods more economically and socially sustainable while cutting our carbon footprint to enhance environmental sustainability.

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*Robyn Douglas, manager of social policy, Sunshine Coast Regional Council*





## Why affordability is an issue

“ Median housing costs are significantly higher on the Sunshine Coast than the South-East Queensland region and Queensland, yet median incomes are significantly lower.

Between 2001 and 2006, the median housing purchase price increased by approximately 130 per cent. In the same period, rents on the Sunshine Coast increased by an average of 9.5 per cent per year, which is greater than the increase for the South-East Queensland region and Queensland and significantly more than the national average.

Rental diversity is lower on the Sunshine Coast than Queensland, indicating the market has not been delivering housing across a wide range of price points. ”

*From 'Housing Needs Assessment Background Study', a Sunshine Coast Regional Council document now out for public consultation.*

four bedrooms on larger blocks with only one or two occupants,” she says. “Why can’t we put our housing stock on a diet to cater for small households also?”

Better-designed neighbourhoods provide a variety of housing options close to facilities and services. This reduces driving, encourages local employment, schooling, shopping and recreation, and in turn creates healthier communities with fewer demands on valuable resources such as land, water and energy. Maroochydore, Kawana and Nambour are considered ideal for such urban renewal or growth, while the greenfield sites of Caloundra South and Palmview can be developed carefully from scratch.

“It is a challenge for planners and the construction industry but the benefits to the Coast will be enormous,” Robyn says. “Sustainability is not just ‘the green stuff’, it’s about the way we live.”

Housing design is integral to the Coast’s sustainability, and that’s just as relevant for large country homesteads as suburban unit blocks. Government and industry professionals say that after initial outlays, home owners save money – through lowered power bills and water charges for example – while saving the environment. And as of January 1, it will be mandatory for sellers across Queensland to complete ‘sustainability declarations’ for buyers (see box, right).

Brad Thompson of Thompson Building Group thinks sustainability is imperative to the future of the industry and the Coast as a whole – so he’s just finished a Diploma of Environmental Management. “We all talk about being sustainable, but what is it really?” he asks. “The Federal and State governments have given us the task of producing housing with minimum five-star energy

ratings, but people don’t realise the more stars, the more money you’ll save.”

TBG’s new division, Thompson Sustainable Homes, has launched a display home that meets 9.5 stars, which is possibly the first on the Coast with such a high green rating in such a low price bracket. “We came up with this idea after buyers kept telling us they wanted to help the environment, but if it cost a lot at the start, the response was ‘sorry, no thanks,’” Brad says. “So we designed this display home for first-home buyers, keeping costs low thanks to our suppliers.”

Priced from \$150,000, or \$290,000 for home and land, the house is transportable and ideal for 300-square metre blocks. It’s about 160 square metres and has a 10- to 12-week build time. “Now we need the council to allow development approvals for smaller lots, like Gympie Council does,” Brad says. “We’ve already sold a couple to Gympie and Dalby, so we hope the demand is here, too.”

Director Brendan Thompson lists some of the sustainability features. “To reduce our carbon footprint during construction we used local products and suppliers to cut transport costs, such as timber from Beerwah forest, we manufactured at a Gympie factory, and used local tradespeople and delivery trucks,” Brendan says. “The home has three bedrooms, two bathrooms and high ceilings to allow natural breezes. It’s a funky, modern design – not just a box. The energy efficiencies we’ve installed would help a home owner save something like \$1200 a year in electricity alone.”

What about when money is no object? How do you reduce your carbon footprint in the lap of luxury?

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## CHANGES TO AFFECT SELLERS

The State Government will require sellers of houses, townhouses or units to complete sustainability declarations as part of any sale from January 1.

The Department of Infrastructure and Planning says a declaration is a compulsory checklist that identifies a property’s environmental and sustainability features in four key areas: energy, water, safety and access.

“It will increase the awareness and marketability of the dwelling’s sustainable building features and will act as an incentive to improve the sustainability performance of Queensland’s 1.6 million existing homes,” says the department.

“Properties that have a greater number of sustainability features can have lower operating costs and be more energy and water efficient. They use less energy for heating and cooling, generate fewer greenhouse gas emissions, use less water, and best of all, are more comfortable to live in.”

However, the Real Estate Institute of Queensland is highly critical of the move, saying much more public education is needed. Managing director Dan Molloy says it will impact tens of thousands of Queenslanders every year via the selling process.

“An agent will be unable to market a property for sale until this form is provided to them by the seller,” Dan says. “The declaration will be a major headache and expense for absentee owners as they may need to engage a consultant to complete it. No doubt a new industry of sustainability specialists will be created so yet another piece of paperwork can be completed before a property can be sold.”

See page 31 and 32 for more, including a copy of the forms. Visit [www.dip.qld.gov.au/sustainablehousing](http://www.dip.qld.gov.au/sustainablehousing).



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The project team behind Gaia House at Mooloolaba recently won the Housing Industry Association's 2009 greensmart energy efficient home of the year award for Queensland. It was also commended at the national BPN Sustainability Awards in Sydney.

MPR followed its construction progress at Culbara Street a year ago and is stunned by the results. Before starting, client Mark Hall and local builders Hamish Gray and Aaron Nicholson of GNBC had studied Coast waterfront homes and decided they were often wasteful, inefficient and unsustainable. Their team then designed an outstanding contemporary home focused on sustainability, using methods architects and builders employed long before the time of grid power and mains water.

Mark wanted to "create a comfortable, relaxed living space with the lowest practical environmental impact. A 70,000-litre water tank and solar PV system made the house independent in both power and water."

The orientation of the block and indoor/outdoor house design contribute to seasonal heating and cooling. A solar-heated pool located inside "acts as a heat sink to achieve my goal of no artificial heating or cooling".

Aaron explains the principle - in summer the breeze passing over the water helps cool the house, in winter the solar-heated pool runs at 26 degrees.

Renewable materials and recyclables also helped produce a minimum carbon footprint for this carefully thought-out mansion. However, Mark says the whole process has shown that more technical and financial support is needed from all levels of government to promote wider sustainability in the industry, such as use of renewable energy sources. "We have an abundance of wind, tide and sunshine and the ability to drive these technologies further to make it work," he says. "But making the solar panel rebate means-testable, for example, discourages people like me making a long-term investment in the technology."

Maroochydore-based Conlon Birrell Landscape Architects established a reinforced turf driveway to allow rainwater to filter into the natural ground supplies and stop run-off into the stormwater system. "Sustainable design techniques can be applied to all landscape projects," says Marc Conlon. "Planting a tree to shade a building is the beginning. [The Gaia home has a mature poinciana.] Then there's onsite recycling of useable waste material, recycling water and much more."

Environmental scientist and landscape architect Tim Hindley believes that while Coast residents and investors must back the push towards sustainability, government must "take the blinkers off" and think laterally about solutions in planning. "Sustainability is not only about minimising the energy required to build houses and live in our neighbourhoods, it's also about local government providing a sustainable supply of land at various scales to meet community needs," says Tim. "It's not just beaches and waterfronts. Our hinterland areas are vital cogs in the sustainability wheel, providing economically viable homes and lifestyles for the average Coast family."

Tim, who is the Urban Development Institute of Australia's representative on the council's Housing Affordability Taskforce, wants the new regional planning scheme to allow innovative products and ideas in engineering, design and planning to flourish. "I hope the council will take some risks and provide strong leadership," he says. ■

For ideas on how to increase your home's sustainability go to [livingsmarthomes.net.au](http://livingsmarthomes.net.au) or [www.sustainable-homes.org.au](http://www.sustainable-homes.org.au). MPR will continue this series in coming weeks.

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Tim Hindley, environmental scientist and landscape architect



## Have your say

The next six roadshows for 'Our Place Our Future'

**Thursday November 19, 3pm-7pm**  
Millwell Road Community Centre,  
11a Millwell Road East, Maroochydore

**Saturday November 21**  
Yandina Markets, Old Bruce Highway,  
Yandina

**Tuesday November 24, 9am-1pm**  
Palmwoods Memorial Hall, Main Street,  
Palmwoods

**Thursday November 26, 9am-1pm**  
Mapleton Community Hall, 31 Obi Obi Road,  
Mapleton

**Saturday November 28, 9am-1pm**  
Innovation Centre, Sunshine Coast University,  
90 Sippy Downs Drive, Sippy Downs

**Sunday November 29**  
Cotton Tree Markets, King Street,  
Cotton Tree

## Sustainability

“ Activities, practices and systems that are able to continue indefinitely and which strengthen the economy, enhance the natural environment and protect the character and identity of communities ”

Sunshine Coast Regional Council

## Housing alternatives

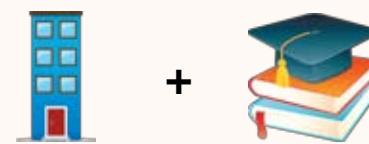
### Family with small children

Family home with backyard and a park down the road.



### Young adult or student

Shared home or unit, access to work/uni and recreation facilities.



### First-home buyer

Smaller home, access to work and facilities.



### Second home or family home

Larger home with backyard and park, shops, school down the road.



### Retired couple

Smaller home with good access to shops, services and facilities, perhaps near their children and grandchildren's home.

