

The Ecovillage at Currumbin

Overview

The Ecovillage at Currumbin is located on a semi-rural site on the Gold Coast, Queensland. The project comprises 144 homes and a village centre including community facilities, home offices and retail space, on 110 hectares of land. 50% of the site has been retained as environmental reserve, with a further 30% dedicated to open space.

The project was privately funded, and the developer, Landmatters Currumbin Valley, was committed to demonstrating the commercial viability of sustainable development. The goal of the developers was to establish a diverse and integrated community for residents of different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. To achieve this, the development consists of different sized lots and houses, at various price points.

The project has been designed to include as many facilities and services onsite, to reduce the need for travel beyond the site, and to also provide for the surrounding residents.

Sustainability features

The Ecovillage aims to ultimately become self-sufficient in energy usage, water usage and waste water recycling. Energy is generated by solar systems mandated for each house, rainwater provides water supply and waste water is treated onsite and reused.

The Architectural and Landscaping Code provides guidelines for the design of residences, including requirements for solar design, appropriate building materials to use and building setbacks, to ensure the best environmental, ecological and social outcomes. Purchasers of vacant land must build their residence within the guidelines outlined in the Architectural and Landscaping Code.

A bus service is planned to service the



development and the surrounding area, and extensive cycling and walking paths are provided around the site.

Self-sufficiency

The Ecovillage at Currumbin aims for self-sufficiency in terms of energy usage, water usage and waste water treatment. The development is not connected to the mains water supply and sewage system. This has been achieved through an integrated approach to:

- water usage efficiency;
- rainwater collection;
- on-site treatment of waste water; and
- a comprehensive management system.

The Architectural and Landscaping Covenant administered by the body corporate includes requirements for passive solar design and energy efficiency measures, reducing energy demand. Grid connected solar power systems are mandated for each home and community building through body corporate by-laws and covenants.

Local living

The development provides a mix of facilities and services within the precinct to allow residents to live, work and socialise locally. This was an important consideration for the development as it is isolated from nearby facilities, potentially resulting in an increase in reliance on cars. The Ecovillage contains a co-op community store, a café/bakery, work spaces, health practitioner rooms, a community school, a plant nursery, a recycling centre and recreational facilities including a hall and open spaces.

A bus service is planned to service the development and the surrounding area upon full occupation of the site.

Local food

Productive landscaping, along with household gardens provide residents with opportunities to pick their own fruit and vegetables throughout the village.

Environmental protection

A key aim of the development was to preserve the high quality natural environment including the world heritage listed rainforest that surrounds the Ecovillage which surrounds it. This is being achieved by retaining half the site as environmental reserve, embedding by-laws about plant species and pet ownership, and ongoing community education.

Community living

The developer saw this project as an opportunity to create a diverse and cohesive community. The establishment of the Ecovillage Community Company, supported by high quality communal facilities and infrastructure, ensures that this objective is carried on as the project enters the operational phase.

Government support

The developer made a deliberate decision not to seek government funding or support for the project so that they could retain complete autonomy in pursuing their development objectives and demonstrate the commercial viability of a highly sustainable precinct project. Instead, they worked collaboratively with Gold Coast City Council to navigate the varied challenges associated with taking a new, more sustainable approach to development.

Implications for planners

Developer led sustainable outcomes

Ecovillage at Currumbin illustrates an increasing recognition within the property sector that market demand exists for innovative property projects that take an integrated approach to sustainability and operational efficiency. While most projects now include a range of relatively tokenistic 'sustainability features', projects like Ecovillage at Currumbin have been recognised for a more comprehensive approach.

In an uncertain real estate market where developers must work harder to attract the lower number of buyers in the market, it may be that planners see an increase in projects seeking to stand out through the incorporation of more innovative sustainability initiatives.

Collaboration between local government and developers

The support of the local council was critical to the success of the project. The council was supportive of the overall vision for the development. Their support included the allocation of a priority planning officer and the provision of technical reports beyond the minimum requirements of the various statutory authorities, ensuring that innovation like water self-sufficiency, untried before, could be approved (partially through education of stakeholders and approval authorities).

The developers deliberately did not seek the financial involvement of government of any level due to a belief that relying on a subsidy would have put the development at the mercy of government.

The local government worked proactively with the developer to ensure that the challenges presented by innovative ESD measures were overcome and the project could be successfully delivered. The project demonstrates that planners can work to assist a developer in a way that leads to a good outcome for the project and the broader community.

Connection to Clean Energy Future package

While the project was developed prior to the enactment of the Clean Energy Future package, there are a number of obvious implications and opportunities.



Carbon price mechanism (CPM)

- reduction in use of materials with high embodied energy
- protection from energy price increases, some of which will be related to carbon pricing.



Renewable and low carbon energy (RLCE)

As renewable and low carbon technologies are further developed and move into full commercialisation, projects like Currumbin will be able to provide an increasing proportion of energy needs through on-site or near-site generation.



Energy efficiency (EE)

The Architectural and Landscaping Covenant established at the Ecovillage demonstrates an approach to guaranteeing energy efficiency outcomes as part of a low-density greenfield development. The CEF package provides support for measures including passive design of community facilities, improved knowledge about energy efficient appliances and more efficient modes of energy transmission and distribution.



Land sector measures

A strong focus of the Ecovillage was to enhance and protect a significant area of surrounding native forest. Establishing an environmental reserve over half the site, embedding by-laws about plant species and pet ownership, and ongoing community education are key mechanisms used to support this. Future projects may have the potential to access support through the Biodiversity Fund and Regional NRM Planning for Climate Change components of the CEF package.

Further reading

- The Ecovillage at Currumbin website: theecovillage.com.au