

Air Apartments bunfight over \$13 million fire cladding bill

Residents in one of Adelaide's most prestigious apartment buildings are at loggerheads over a deadly fire risk that could cost them up to \$300,000 each.



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Residents of the prestigious Air Apartments are facing bills of up to \$300,000 each to replace potentially deadly flammable cladding on their 140-unit building – with some fearing they could lose their homes as debate among them on what should be done turns “toxic”.

Apartment owners are divided on the solution, some vowing to fight government plans to force the removal of the deadly material.

On the other side of the split, some want the cladding removed and the problem resolved “once and for all” at an annual general meeting of owners this month.

But they also want financial help from the state government and Burnside Council, as the bodies that approved the 2005 development.

One resident of the 12-storey Greenhill Rd block, Judith Grimmett, wants the cladding stripped but said a costing supplied to residents this month shows she faces a bill of \$140,000.

She said the division between those who want the cladding to remain and those who want help to replace it had led to verbal fighting in common areas of the building including the foyer.

“Infighting is out of control in the building. The atmosphere is toxic because of the level of worry,” Mrs Grimmett said.

“Can you imagine being told you have to find between \$50,000 and \$300,000 for this to be done with no information from the state government.”



Residents of the Air Apartments who have concerns about flammable cladding on the apartment building. Picture: NCA NewsWire / Kelly Barnes

WHAT THE RESIDENTS MUST PAY

The Air Apartments residents pictured above have been given huge bills to fix the problem.

Michael Beerworth, \$59,800 bill: “Sixty thousand dollars is a lot out of my bucket and the only hope is that it will improve the value of the place when it is done”.

Duncan Scott, \$92,000 bill: “The council approved of the place and why is this now our issue?”

Judith Grimmett, \$140,000 bill: “This was the old ETSA building, a huge urban revitalisation that gave the government much glory. But now neither Burnside nor the state government will help us”.

Richard Tyrcha, unknown cost

Barrie Grimmett, \$140,000 bill: “The state government must show leadership and initiative and help solve this problem as interstate”.

Gayle Brooks, unknown bill: “I am not happy that we have to pay more money for this, and I’m not sure what the solution is for us”.

It is understood the amounts to be paid are determined by the size of the apartments.

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The dangers of aluminium composite panels forced assessments of buildings worldwide after causing the 2017 Grenfell Tower block disaster in London which killed 72 residents.

Air Apartments was one of 28 private buildings highlighted as high risk in a 2019 state government audit as clad with the deadly and highly flammable material.

Councils, the MFS and CFS have been working on solutions and Mrs Grimmett said anger among Air Apartments owners had been fuelled by a decision of neighbouring Adelaide City Council in July that its affected residents would not have to pay.

Private buildings in the CBD and North Adelaide in July were downgraded from “high risk” because of improved fire safety systems, but Mrs Grimmett said Burnside Council had said it was not prepared to make similar changes.

“Adelaide City Council has taken a more flexible approach, Burnside Council has not,” she said.

“That means that adjoining councils have taken opposing views and we are caught in a vile situation, and Burnside has insisted that they want the cladding removed.”



The prestigious Air Apartments.

Air Apartments residents' committee presiding officer Michael Rabbitt said it was unjust that some people could lose their homes and the state government must step in.

“It is possible that people living on a fixed income may not be able to afford the increased financial burden,” he said.

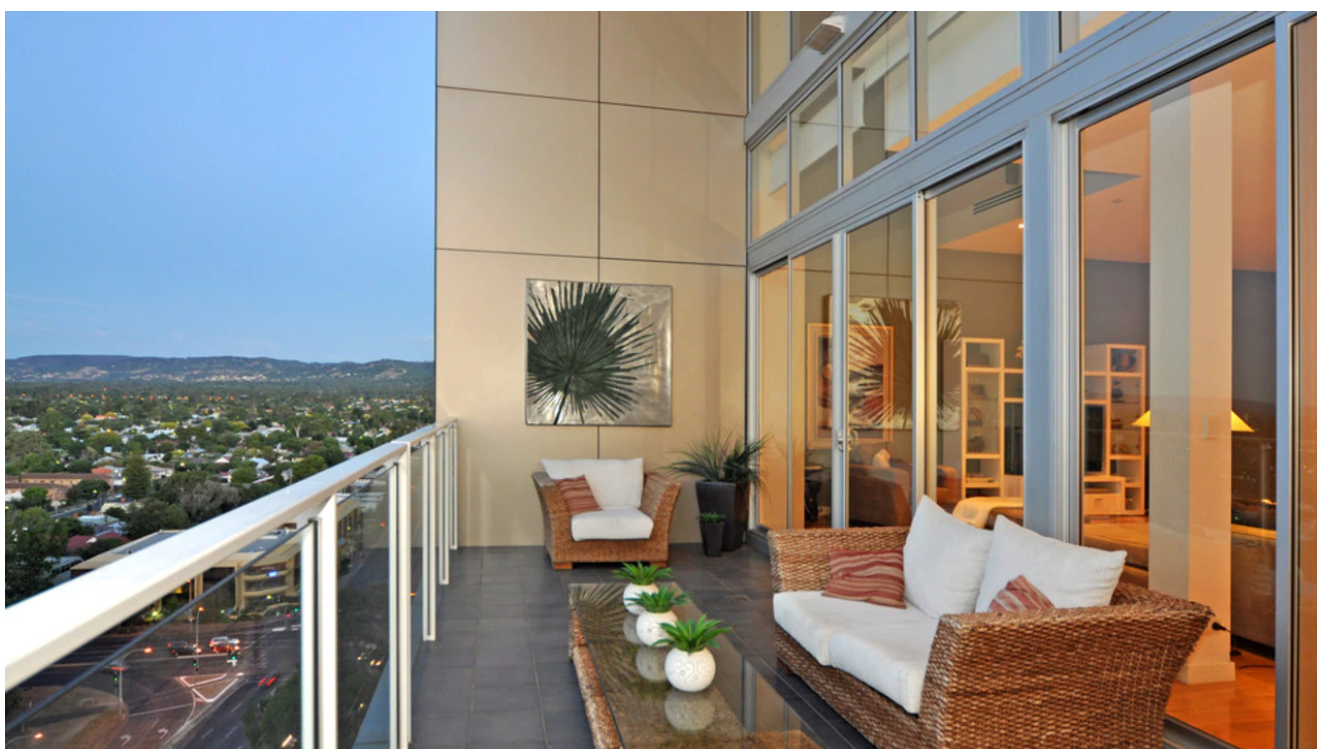
“In that case, they may be forced to sell their home, which would be a significant social injustice.

“We continue to seek financial assistance from the state government. Assistance has been provided in different forms in other Australian states, but not in South Australia.”

The state government would not comment on payment options for residents, but a Trade And Investment Department spokesman said the determination of building safety was very complex and sites should not be compared.

“Any remedial work determined by a council Building Fire Safety Committee is dependent on many things, like the proximity to other buildings, height of the building, placement and quantity of the cladding, whether fire sprinklers are installed etc,” he said.

“Not all cladding is the same. Some cladding is solid, some is filled with material which can be more combustible than solid cladding and therefore it can be very



The view from the penthouse in the Air Apartments complex.

difficult to determine the type of cladding installed on a building. Testing may be required.”

Burnside Council chief executive Chris Cowley said it had not made a final decision on the solution to the problem and was waiting for input from the residents’ AGM before making comment.

“Should any cladding be required to be removed, this is the principal responsibility of the building owner,” he said.

One resident, Duncan Scott, said he was unhappy that the council, developers and the state government would not help with his \$92,000 bill despite approving and lauding the project as a landmark development at the time.

“There has been a proposal from (Bragg MP Jack Batty) that there be interest-free loans from the state but that doesn’t solve it because we are still left with a big bill,” he said.

The Air Apartments building was a flagship development promoted by the state government to help rejuvenate the inner city, being just outside the parklands, in the early 2000s.

The government had sold the former ETSA building in 1992 to developers, but a series of bungled developments failed until the current rejuvenation opened in 2005.

For many years the building held the record, \$3.9m, for an Adelaide apartment sale.