

Alongside the visible signs of wealth on the northern beaches, scores of residents are technically homeless after suffering financial and emotional setbacks coupled with a chronic lack of affordable accommodation, writes **MARJ BELESSIS** and **NATHALIE CATTANEO**

A town

ARE you looking for a place to rent? You have a job, a record of paying landlords on time and a fistful of references attesting to your solvency and good character in other respects.

Of course, you can expect to have to compete with at least half a dozen other applicants for the rental property on offer, but given that you have all the above-mentioned credentials, you just might get lucky.

Late last year, official figures showed that over the previous 12 months, Warringah lost 35 per cent of its rental property stock (down from 8952 in 2005 to 5387 in 2006), and Manly 30 per cent (3831 to 2746).

At the same time, land tax collected by the state from investment properties went ahead in leaps and bounds, jumping from \$9.77 million to more than \$14 million in Manly, and from \$15.8 million to \$18 million in Warringah.

Although the growing land tax impost is cited as the main reason for the exodus of investors from the rental property market, other reasons that have been suggested include more attractive investment avenues, like stocks and shares, and superannuation.

One local real estate agent said he had one or two landlords per week selling their properties to put their money into super.

"They are still not seeing good rental yields, and though there may be good capital gains around the corner, they are not sure," he said. "On the other hand, the opportunity that exists before June 30 to invest large lump sums in superannuation is very attractive."

The end result, fewer rental properties to go around, means the competition is fierce for what is available, especially in the rental market "mainstream" (properties advertised for between \$300 and \$500 a week).

Those near the bottom of the socio-economic demographic have next to no chance.

Margaret and her husband David (not their real names) and their three children - two teenagers and an eight-year-old - were renting a home unit in Balgowlah until early last year.

David, a builder's labourer, had been fully employed for three years, but when the work became sporadic and the bills began to mount, they fell into arrears with the rent, and were eventually evicted.

For some months the family was technically homeless, living for a time in a garage and then in a backpackers' hostel.

They are now occupying a one-room studio apartment in a block of serviced



Street Mission founder Alan Clarke provides hot meals to Manly's homeless outside the Manly Uniting Church on Saturdays. Picture: ANNIKA ENDERBORG

‘If you don't have a safe and secure place of residence, you are considered to be homeless,’

apartments normally rented to holiday-makers at \$200 a night.

They pay a weekly rental of \$270 and Margaret makes up the shortfall by cleaning the apartments, a job that has her on call seven days a week.

"I change the bed linen, provide a vacuuming service every three days and collect the garbage," she said.

"It's not light work. I often have to struggle down three flights of stairs with six bags of rubbish, papers and bottles.

"The most I've had to do is 11 or 12 units in one day."

She said their living accommodation - one big room, with a tiny kitchen alcove and a bathroom, was far from ideal for a family of five.

"We're very lucky we have such good children," she said of her two teenagers and one eight-year-old. "They're used to living in small spaces, but it can't be good for them."

Margaret said the family had had their

name on the public housing list for some years, but had heard nothing.

"Last year, we asked for emergency accommodation, and were told there was nothing available," she said.

"Just before Christmas I had an appointment to see a public housing officer and after waiting three hours to be interviewed, I was told I hadn't brought along the required documents."

She hasn't been back.

Margaret said she and her husband would like to find more suitable accommodation in the private rental market, but given the fact that they had been evicted and didn't have the money to pay a bond, it would be an uphill battle.

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February is Operation Cat Month in Warringah

Warringah Council and the Cat Protection Society are offering Warringah residents a specially reduced rate for cat desexing and microchipping.

Officers from the Cat Protection Society can offer you a door-to-door service. This means your cat can be collected and taken by air-conditioned ambulance to the Society's vet clinic where it will be microchipped and desexed. It will be kept overnight and then returned home to you the next day. Vaccinations are also available.

Fees for this service are:

Desex and microchip female cat	\$85
Desex and microchip male cat	\$75
Single vaccination	\$40

To participate in Operation Cat Month, please contact the Cat Protection Society directly on 9519 7201. For other information, contact Warringah Council's Animal Advisory Officer, Mrs Terry-Ann Tregear on 9942 2715.

of extremes



“But some people put it off until it all becomes too hard. It’s a really important step to say ‘I need help’ and to trust people to help you”

Manly Community Centre’s project officer, Sonja Hall.



Where to go if you need a head start

THE NSW Housing Department provides help through Rentstart for people on low incomes to meet the high cost of moving into the private rental market.

This includes contributing up to 75 per cent of the cost of the rental bond required of new tenants.

People experiencing severe financial and housing circumstances may be eligible for Rentstart Plus and provided with up to the full bond, up to

two weeks advance rent, four weeks rent arrears, or four weeks rent in temporary accommodation.

To be eligible for Rentstart, clients must be eligible for public housing, have limited cash assets (generally less than \$1000) and be able to sustain a tenancy in the private rental market.

Assistance is generally limited to a 12-month period.

For Margaret and her family, “eating out” means going to the Street Mission Cafe which dispenses hot meals to Manly’s homeless and disadvantaged outside the Manly Uniting Church of a Saturday night.

Street Mission founder Alan Clarke said Manly was a very polarised place, a town of two extremes - the affluent and those who were struggling.

“You don’t have to be living on the streets to be homeless,” he said. “If you don’t have a safe and secure place of residence, you are considered to be homeless.”

“Quite a few of our clients are technically homeless - they are living in garages or staying with friends in

situations where the accommodation is overloaded.”

Mr Clarke said that, contrary to the general perception, one didn’t have to be middle-aged and alcoholic to be homeless.

“A lot of people are in this situation because they have had one severe knock in life,” he said. “With some of them, it happened during childhood, with others it could be a bereavement, business failure or marriage breakup.”

“Figures published about five years ago by the Society of St Vincent de Paul estimated there were 150,000 people (in Australia) living on the streets. My feeling is that that figure has increased since then.

“Our society doesn’t put enough into looking after these people.”

Manly Mayor Peter Macdonald said housing was scarce in the area for people on a low income and blamed the critical public housing situation on the northern beaches on years of neglect by both State and Federal governments.

Manly Community Centre, largely funded by Manly Council, provides resources for those who are homeless of “at risk”.

The centre’s project manager, Sonja Hall, said the cost of housing in the area presented a major problem.

“There is a chronic lack of affordable housing,” she said. “Where you shut the

door at night is a big thing. People quite genuinely need accommodation.”

Ms Hall said although the main causes of homelessness were mental illness, substance abuse and family breakdowns, some homeless people were merely down on their luck.

“But preventive measures can really help,” she said. “It’s about sourcing support before issues get harder.”

“We try to encourage people to seek support when they have a problem. We can assist by referring them to the appropriate body that can help them.”

“But some people put it off until it all becomes too hard. It’s a really important step to say ‘I need help’ and to trust people to help you.” □

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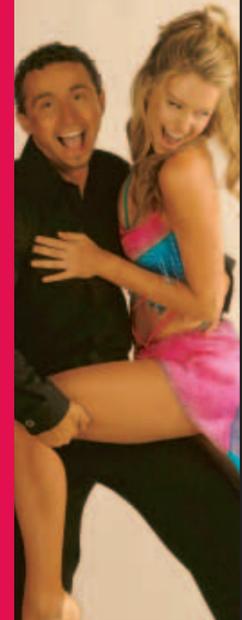
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