Construction crisis forces Queensland developers to build smaller townhouses



David Bonaddio, Real Estate Reporter
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The Block star Sonny Aplin says Queensland's tradie shortage has left him struggling to hire plumbers, despite running one of the busiest businesses of his career.

A former Block star is struggling to hire plumbers as Queensland's building boom pushes up costs and forces developers to rethink what they build.

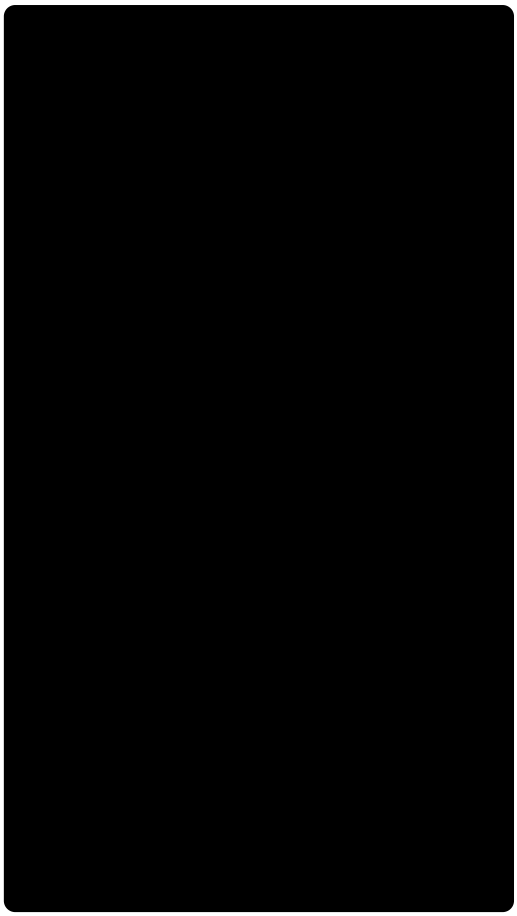
Gold Coast plumber Sonny Aplin said major construction sites were offering wages and allowances smaller businesses could not match, leaving him stuck on the tools at 46.

It comes as new modelling forecasts Brisbane building costs will climb 10 per cent in 2028, with some developments at risk of being delayed or scrapped.

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Construction consultancy WT predicts building costs will increase 8 per cent in 2027, 10 per cent in 2028 and 7.5 per cent in 2029.

The increases compound to about 27.7 per cent over three years, while Gold Coast building costs are forecast to rise 9.5 per cent in 2028 alone.

The forecasts cover larger building projects, including apartment towers and commercial developments, rather than detached houses or renovations.



An artist's impression of BPG Developments' $165m Lierre project at Palm Beach. Gold Coast building costs are forecast to climb 9.5 per cent in 2028.

Mr Aplin, director of Apples Contracting and a contestant on The Block in 2025, said his plumbing business was as busy as it had ever been.

But finding licensed workers had become increasingly difficult.

"Staff is a massive issue. I am constantly on the lookout for blokes," Mr Aplin said.

"I'm 46 years of age and ideally I'd like to not be on the tools, but I'm running my business and I'm on the tools simply because I can't find the men to be able to fill those jobs."



Gold Coast plumber Sonny Aplin, pictured with his family, says major construction sites are offering wages smaller operators cannot match, making skilled workers harder to recruit.

Mr Aplin said major unionised construction sites were offering higher wages and additional allowances, making it difficult for smaller operators to compete.

He had struggled to recruit suitable employees for up to two years, forcing him to rely on more expensive subcontractors.

Rising material costs were adding to the pressure.

Mr Aplin said some plumbing pipes had jumped in price by about 43 per cent earlier this year, affecting jobs quoted before the increase.

Even wealthy clients were scaling back their building plans.

He said a project in a prestigious Gold Coast area had lost some higher-end finishes because of construction costs.

But developers were also finding new ways to deliver housing.

Mr Aplin said he was working on a 23-townhouse development in Logan where two-storey homes were being assembled from prefabricated sections.

Each residence was designed to arrive in four parts before being installed on site, with trades completing the groundwork.

He was also involved in a modular beachfront home at Jefferson Lane, Palm Beach, where building costs had influenced the decision to use prefabricated construction.

Despite his business being exceptionally busy, Mr Aplin said smaller residential builders could face quieter conditions next year.

He expected major projects and high-end construction to remain comparatively resilient.



Place Projects director Bruce Goddard says rising construction costs are pushing developers towards smaller floor plans and townhouses, with new properties around $1m attracting strong demand.

Place Projects director Bruce Goddard said rising construction costs were already prompting Brisbane developers to rethink their plans.

“Building costs are going up and developers are rethinking their projects,” Mr Goddard said.

“Some new projects are using smaller floor plans to compensate for the higher costs, but the big change is the number of townhouses we’re seeing.”

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Mr Goddard said townhouses were generally cheaper to build than high-rise apartments and were attracting strong demand from downsizers and first-home buyers.

"New townhouses priced up to around $1 million are selling like hotcakes in the current market, and we see that as a trend," he said.



Brisbane's Queen's Wharf precinct. A booming pipeline of major projects is putting pressure on construction resources, with building costs forecast to rise 10 per cent in 2028. Picture: Steve Pohlner

One developer had expanded its ambitions after a successful 45-townhouse project.

Mr Goddard said neighbouring properties had been acquired for another 40 townhouses on one side and 18 on the other.

The expansion could take the combined development pipeline to 103 townhouses.

While some projects were being delayed, he rejected suggestions developers were abandoning Queensland.

"We're seeing no sign of developers walking away," Mr Goddard said.

"We're actually getting more interstate developers looking to take a position in Brisbane."



WT construction economist Damon Roast warns Brisbane's construction boom could make some proposed developments financially unviable as competition for skilled workers intensifies.

WT construction economist Damon Roast said Brisbane's building boom was creating intense competition for contractors and skilled workers.

Infrastructure, hospitals, data centres, housing and Brisbane 2032-related projects were drawing on the same limited industry resources.

"Brisbane's pressure reflects the cumulative effect of several major pipelines competing for a market that cannot expand quickly enough," Mr Roast said.

He warned sustained cost increases could make some proposed developments financially unviable, particularly where sales or rental returns could not justify construction expenses.

However, evidence of projects being abandoned remained at an early stage.

Mr Roast said some marginal developments could instead be redesigned, staged or postponed until market conditions improved.

Queensland's housing shortage was also making it harder to attract additional construction workers, who needed affordable accommodation themselves.

"Housing is needed to support a larger workforce, but delivering that housing requires many of the same constrained trades," Mr Roast said.