

On the Home Front

Bi-monthly column by: Linda Skolnick

How to work with a Contractor

Are you lucky enough to have actually found a contractor that is not only available...but that you actually like? Working with a contractor on a home renovation project can be rewarding, but it can be frustrating too. So, how do you make sure your working relationship is successful?

First, insure that you have a well-written contract. In addition to detailing the work that is to be completed, the amount to be paid, and the responsibilities of each party, a good contract should include provisions to protect both you and the contract if terms are not met. Most contractors have their own documents, but you can supply your own. Do not hesitate to negotiate changes in a standard contract. If you're unsure of any legal language, consult an attorney. Then, the contract should follow the project through securing permits and job completion.

Second, after you settle the contract terms, discuss daily start and stop times as well as completion dates for each phase of the project. Determine if you need to vacate the house (during demolition, for example), or can you live there while the project is underway.

Thirdly, make sure you have established a clear payment schedule. Often, the project starts out with an initial retainer at contract signing. For most projects, a staggered schedule of payments coinciding with key completion dates works best after initial retainer. Many like any changes from original agreement (small or large) to be written as a change order, which specifies not only the change but also the cost of the change. Many expert recommend withholding 10 percent of the project's cost until after completion, to insure that the contractor will actually fix all the problems and finish the job.

A schedule for weekly meetings with your contractor is the fourth recommendation to keeping a healthy property owner/contractor relation flourishing. Before the project begins, schedule a meeting with the contractor to discuss details including the master schedule, work hours, safety, and daily cleanup. Set a time for a regular weekly meeting to discuss any persistent problems or issues that arise during construction.

Patience levels may quickly deteriorate when a contractor doesn't clean up post construction mess. Work areas should be picked up daily (especially if you are living there) and cleaned when the project is finished.

Contractor/Homeowner relationships that start out with the best of intentions can become very trying when you are displaced in your home. Renovation is rarely convenient. But in

the end, luckily, most of us have short memories...and hopefully the beautiful renovation will be much longer lasting.