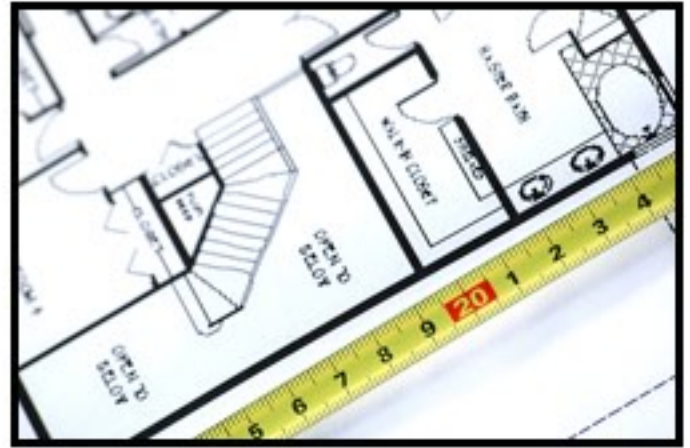


Hiring the Right Contractor

Many homeowners are discovering they may be able to live in an updated house without the need to change their address. To achieve this goal, some residents may find themselves in discussions with building contractors, trying to negotiate and plan their remodeling project.



Before serious remodeling discussion begins, however, property owners need to plan their project carefully, keeping the scope of the work and budgetary constraints in mind. One way to quantify a project is to write everything down, including brand names and models. When it's time to explain the project to potential contractors, "high quality faucets," "ivory paint" or "sustainable flooring" may mean something different to each person involved. Starting with accurate plans or blueprints can detail a project much better than describing it verbally.

Once it's time to get down to brass tacks (or aluminum siding), the real negotiation begins. It makes sense to not only read between the lines, but make sure both the homeowner and the contractor sign on the dotted line. A contractor who says he wants to seal an agreement with a handshake is probably not someone you want assigned to your job. A written contract is less likely to be misinterpreted and protects both parties.



What about the cost of the project?

Even a contractor who insists he is offering you his "bottom-line price," may be enticed to lower the cost by several percent or at least throw in some upgrades or extras. By getting multiple written estimates, you can compare apples to apples and discover the price range in which the project legitimately falls. From there, everything, or at least most things, may be negotiable.

For some people, price is not the most important consideration, it's the only consideration. But such a policy may end up costing more in the end. A slightly higher estimate may be well worth the cost by the gains received in material and workmanship.

What happens if a contractor seeks to be paid for the entire job up front? It pays to be suspicious when a contractor wants full payment before the job has begun. Some contractors use money from a new job to pay down bills from past jobs. But you don't want to be the last project in line if a contractor's credit runs out. Rather than pay up front, a limited down payment of no more than ten percent of the total project is a reasonable fee structure. A payment schedule can then be established contingent upon completion of different phases of the work. If the work does not proceed according to schedule, the payments also are delayed.



The scope of the project may include permitted work. But what happens when your contractor suggests everyone's life would be easier without that little slip of paper? A permit does take time and includes a fee, but in many areas authorities can enforce removal of unpermitted work and to have the home returned to the condition it was in before any remodeling began. Even small wiring, plumbing and framing jobs require a permit (in most areas). Once a permit is granted, the homeowner is protected by an inspector who ensures all work complies with existing codes.