RESALE

Referrals, references important when seeking a contractor

By Jeanette McNamee

From small repairs to major remodels, many homes need some work done before the For Sale sign goes up or before the new owners move in.

You want someone you can trust and feel comfortable with to complete your project. So take time to choose the person who will work on your home, advises the Texas Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division.

The selection process should include seeking referrals from real estate professionals or trade associations for an established contractor; asking for references and proof of license and insurance; making sure to get bids in writing; and contacting the Better Business Bureau and Chamber of Commerce to find out more about potential contractors.

"If you want information from someone who has a broad base of experience, one of the best resources for information on contractors is your Realtor," said Patti Bennett, a long-time San Antonio Realtor. "A Realtor and his or her clients are involved in dozens of property transactions every year and many, if not most, of those properties require the attention of contractors."

Buyers and sellers often ask their Realtors for recommendations on contractors and share feedback with them about the company's performance after the job is completed.

The Texas Attorney General's office recommends choosing an established contractor who has experience with the ins and outs of getting a house ready to sell.

"We can show or point out what inspectors look for and what needs to be done to get a house ready to go on the market," said Bob Nichols of Bob Nichols Floors.

BC Builds Texas, which completed this kitchen remodel, recommends that consumers check with the City of San Antonio to verify that a contractor is licensed, and be sure to ask the contractor if they have insurance.

He estimated that 99 percent of his business comes from referrals, and much of that from Realtors.

A home warranty company is another source for finding a qualified contractor, suggested Roger Torres, project manager for BC Builds Texas. These companies generally have a list of workers who they rely on when needed.

Also, services such as Angie's List offer contractor rating and reviews from people who have used a company's services.

"Individuals looking for a contractor should check to see if (the contractor) is licensed with the City of San Antonio. That is a critical step most homeowners fail to take." Torres said. "They should also ask if a contractor has insurance."

BC Builds Texas is called on for a variety of tasks ranging from kitchen remodels, roofing jobs and door installations to faucet and ceiling fan replacements.

"The most common job we have performed, primarily because it is a recurring task done at the request of a home warranty company, is dry wall repairs," Torres said.

Professional associations such as the National Association of the Remodeling Industry or National Association of Homebuilders can put you in contact with experienced contractors, many of which have certifications.

The NARI suggests asking the following questions when interviewing a potential contractor:

■ **How long have you been in business?**
Look for a company with an established business history in your community.

■ **Does your company carry workers-compensation and liability insurance?**
Ask for copies of the insurance certificates to verify coverage.

■ **Are any of your company's employees certified?**
Trade certifications are good indicators of dedication, professionalism and knowledge of the industry.

■ **May I have a list of references for projects you have completed which are similar to mine?**
The contractor should be able to supply you with a minimum of three references, including names, telephone numbers and addresses. As a follow-up to this question, ask how long ago the project was completed and if the contractor can arrange a visit to see the finished job.

■ **How many projects like mine have you completed in the past 12 months?**
This will help you determine the contractor's familiarity with your type of project. You should confirm that a good portion of those completed projects were similar to the type of project you are proposing.

■ **Will we need a permit for this project?**
Most cities require permits for building projects. Failure to obtain the necessary permits or to arrange obligatory inspections can be illegal. In some cases, if a project violates a zoning law or some other regulations, it may even have to be demolished if there is no way to comply with the law. A qualified remodeling contractor will be conscious of the permit process and ensure that all permits have been obtained before initiating any work.

The Texas Attorney General's office provides additional advice on choosing a home improvement contractor, signing contracts, paying for the work and more.

Sources: National Association of the Remodeling Industry, www.nari.org; Texas Attorney General Consumer Protection Division, www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/cpd.

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