

Conduct thorough interviews with potential contractors

BY DAVID BRADLEY
The Associated Press

Short and sweet may be great for giving speeches, but long and bland are more apt descriptors for how to conduct contractor interviews.

Homeowners — often in a rush to get a project started — will cut short the critical give-and-take process between themselves and the candidates in line for contracts that are worth tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars.

When homeowners are too soft on contractors or skip the hard questions, they open a Pandora's box "rife with possibilities for miscommunication, cost overruns, and finger pointing."

In the absence of a formal interview, the consumer only kicks the tires and misses what's beneath the hood. The worse case scenario is homeowners don't learn all they need to know and the contractor has no opportunity to tell his side of the story.

Booklet authors recommend consumers go well beyond contractor availability and workmanship to delve into a range of broader issues from reputation to financial acumen to communication skills.

Here's a sampling of soup-to-nuts topics both sides should prepare for:

- Quality of work and job

experience

- Professional licenses and insurance
- Scope of work
- Budget and materials
- History of liens
- Consumer and contractor expectations
- Communication

show their professional skills and business abilities.

The interview is the first step in what may be a protracted professional relationship. As is noted in the booklet, "Too often, the homeowner mistakes contractors as only hired work-

kets where contractors can be hard to find, you need to satisfy yourself that all questions are answered before work starts. Don't assume anything. Better to ask early than be surprised later."

Group questions in writing

gladly answer questions.

Real pros welcome inquiries because it helps weed out contractors who may skirt answers or pursue jobs based on price alone.

Such preparation serves several purposes. Homeowners give them-

selves a consistent basis to judge the pluses and minuses of multiple contractor candidates. Quality contractors may also raise points on materials or construction practices the homeowner may have no reason to know about.



AP Photo/David Bradley

Prepare a contract for your project. Big jobs, such as this home, require a detailed contract. But small home improvement projects should have contracts, too. Contract templates are available from local engineers, architects or builder associations.

A face-to-face interview projects the homeowner attitude that their project is more than a low-bid proposition. Likewise, professional contractors will seize the interview as a chance to

ers or project overseers, when in fact a contractor should be viewed as combination counselor, project overseer, materials expert and cost-control coordinator. Even in housing mar-

by subject category. There's no harm in supplying the contractor with the topic list in advance.

In fact, good contractors — those with established, reputable businesses — will

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- Use denatured alcohol to disinfect tools.
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- After cleaning and sharpening, wipe a thin layer of

oil onto metal surfaces to protect from rust and dust.

- If wood handles develop rough spots or splinters, sand them out. Coat all wood handles with linseed oil.
- Inspect all screws, nuts and bolts on all tools to be sure they are secure.
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