

Ready to re-shingle?
Choosing a good contractor can be a dizzying game of

Roofer consequences

By David Chesanow

For many, the so-called Hanukkah Eve Wind Storm of 2006 raised not just shingles but hackles as the ugly prospect of re-roofing loomed large. But for my family, the imperative came crashing down a year earlier, in the form of a three-by-four-foot section of living-room ceiling. A new roof was overdue, we knew, but the drywall at our feet – weakened by a slow leak over many weeks or months – meant that we were officially in the market for a roofer. After tacking tarps over and under the damage, we started making phone calls.

People always say you should get more than one written estimate: We got five, which ranged from \$4,370 to \$8,600, sales tax not included.

Why the spread of nearly four grand? That was unclear, even on comparison. Four of the proposals included on 30-year laminated or composition shingles (one mid-priced proposal included 20-year shingles; an upgrade to 30-year shingles would put it among the most expensive). Two bids offered five-year warranties on the work; three offered 10. Four specified that the shingles would be hand-nailed. The two priciest proposals requested that 50 percent up front (ostensibly to pay for the materials). One proposal included an inspection for rot and insect infestation; another said waste materials would be recycled ...

You get the idea: No two proposals will be exactly alike. Here's some advice on hiring a contractor to install asphalt shingles, the roofing material typically used for homes.

The estimates

First off, plan on getting at least three. "Don't just call the top listing in the phone book or the guy with the biggest ad," said Kristin Alexander, public information officer for the Washington State Attorney General's Office, which offers advice on hiring contractors. "Shop around: That extra bit of time to get multiple bids will save money and ultimately save you a big headache."

Shari Purves-Reiter, outreach and education programmer with the Washington State Department of Labor and Industries (L&I), made these recommendations:

- **Do an Internet search on prospective contractors.** Go to the Washington State Department of Labor and Industries (L&I) Web site to ensure that the roofers you're considering are registered with the state and to see if they have committed any infractions or have any lawsuits lodged against them.

- **Make certain any contractor with employees has an open and valid workmen’s compensation account.** If not, you could be held liable if a worker is injured on your property.
- **Specify a start and end date for the job.**
- **Be specific about the brand of material to be used.** Ask for a copy of the invoice from the supplier: “Be cautious about paying more than 10 or 15 percent up front,” Purves-Reiter warned. “If they’re asking for a larger deposit to pay for materials, ask to pay for the materials directly to the supplier so that you’re not paying for the supplies for the last job they just completed.”
- **If the materials and labor will exceed \$1,000, be aware that the contractor is required to make a disclosure statement apprising you of your rights and responsibilities.**

Of course, anything you agree on should be in writing.

The nature of the work

One of the roofers we considered asserted that hand-nailing shingles is better than stapling. While acknowledging that a roofer who staples or uses a nail gun can do a good job – provided the staples go into the shingles at a 90-degree angle to secure them properly – he pointed out that inexperienced or lazy roofers often staple at oblique angles. Result: shingles that are weakly attached and subject to wind peel.

Doug Etter, a home inspector for Always Ready Inspection Service in Lacey, said, “My personal opinion is that hand nailing is better,” but added that in either case nail heads or staples should be flush with the shingle’s surface in order not to tear the asphalt mat of the shingle, weakening the seal: “It’s hard to overdrive a hand-driven nail, whereas it’s easier to overdrive with a nail gun or a staple gun,” he noted.

Etter had these suggestions when interviewing contractors to re-roof your house:

- **Ask how long they’ve been in business and get recent references with telephone numbers to check up on workmanship.**
- **Make sure they will replace all flashing, vents, etc.** Some roofers will reuse hardware in order to keep the costs lower, Etter observed: “Recycling weathered material is potentially a problem because it’s already reached the end of its useful life and should be replaced.”
- **Don’t plan to over-roof.** Do a complete tear-off and re-roof no matter how good the current roof may appear. Tearing off the existing surface allows for inspection of the wood roof deck and replacement of damaged wood.
- **Get your roofer to agree to leave at least a “two-knuckle” overhang at the bottom of the roof.** If the bottom row of shingles doesn’t extend far enough, water can roll back under the eaves and

cause damage. Yet, Etter said, some roofers will attempt to save two or three bundles of shingles per house by shortening the overhang.

- **Ask for a five- or ten-year warranty on the work.** While every house is different, Etter believes that, realistically, a properly installed roof should last 80-plus percent of its advertised life: In other words, a "20-year" roof should be good for 18 years, a "30-year" roof should last 25, etc.
- **Make sure a cleanup is part of the contract.** Etter said that some contractors drag a large magnet around the work area to pick up stray nails and other metal: "It's a level of courtesy and professionalism that will identify the better crews."

For more information on correct roofing practices, check with your local permit department.

The finished job

How do you know if the job's been done right? If you can't oversee the work yourself – and wouldn't know what to look for anyway – Nick Gromicko, founder of the National Association of Certified Home Inspectors (a nonprofit trade association), suggested, "Have an inspector review the proposal, monitor the installation of the roof while it's being done and then look at it when it's complete and give you the OK to make the final payment to the contractor."

Learn more

For advice on choosing a contractor, and to check up on specific contractors, visit these Web sites:

- Washington State Attorney General's Office
www.atg.wa.gov
- Washington State Department of Labor and Industries
www.lni.wa.gov
- Better Business Bureau
<http://www.thebbb.org/consumermain.htm>

For information on roofing, visit:

- National Association of Certified Home Inspectors
www.nachi.org

- National Roofing Contractors Association
www.nrca.net
- Western States Roofing Contractors Association
www.wsrca.com

Tips from the Washington State Attorney General's Office

“Avoid contractors who demand payment in advance,” Attorney General Rob McKenna advises. “Shop around for a fair quote, obtain all promises in writing and always check with the Department of Labor and Industries to ensure a contractor is registered and bonded.”

The Attorney General's Office cited the example of a Vancouver woman who reportedly was quoted \$600 to repair six roof shingles: She found another contractor to do the job for \$50.

Here's advice from the Attorney General's Office on finding a reliable contractor:

Check insurance policies and warranties. Before you start work, check your insurance policies and warranties. The warranty on your roof may require you to use a certain repair company.

Get referrals. Ask friends or neighbors, home improvement stores and trade associations like the Master Builders Association. All contractors who do construction work in Washington must be registered with the state Department of Labor and Industries, post a bond and carry general liability insurance coverage.

Get at least three written bids. The contract should cover the work to be performed, the total price including taxes and fees, the materials to be used, start and completion dates, warranties, payment schedules, sign-off procedures, cleanup, and an explanation of how changes to the work will be handled. For residential projects costs of \$1,000 or more, the contractor must give you a written disclosure statement that explains your rights and responsibilities.

Ask the contractor for a lien release for all subcontractors and suppliers. If a contractor fails to pay a subcontractor, worker or supplier, you could be sued and have a lien placed on your property to satisfy the unpaid bill.

Don't make the final payment until you are fully satisfied with the finished product and know that subcontractor or suppliers have been paid.

Red flags

Be wary of contractors who:

- solicit door-to-door
- provide unverifiable credentials or references

- pressure you for an immediate decision
- accept only cash, require large deposits (10 to 15 percent of the bid price is normal) or require the entire cost up front
- don't provide a written contract or complete bid.
- ask you to get required building permits (In most instances, the contractor is required to take out the permits.)
- offer an exceptionally long warranty or an exceptionally low bid
- suggest you borrow money from a lender the contractor knows: It may be a scam to get you to sign a home equity loan.