

## Steps to ensure good contractor work

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When should a board undertake significant repairs or improvements without the services of an architect or engineer in the planning stage for the work? Such technical assistance can amount to 15 to 20 percent of a job's cost. Some jobs, such as hallway painting or coating parking lots with sealant, can generally be done by dealing directly with contractors.

"There are many times when a board and management don't need experts," said **Angela Falzone**, a principal in Association Advocates Inc. in Park Ridge. "Hire them only when you need them."

But for any job, simple or complex, here are some tips.

- Have your attorney review the contract before signing.

"In fact, don't hesitate to bring in your attorney before, during and after the contract," said Kathy Whitman, president of the Barrington Square Improvement Association. She has had a lot of experience hiring and negotiating with contractors of all types.

- Be sure the contractor is insured, having both liability and workmen's compensation coverage as well as any necessary bonds. The association should be named as an additional insured.

- Be sure to get the necessary permits, which some contractors will leave up to the association.

- Have a clear understanding of the scope of service, so you can hold the contractor accountable for shortcomings.

- Have a clear understanding of what is an extra. "There should be a clause in the contract that sets a price for unseen items," Falzone said.

- Be prepared for changes. There's almost no such thing as a firm contract.

"Always expect there will be some details missed. Don't be surprised: Be prepared," Falzone said.

- Negotiate additional work with the contractor. Some owners might request extras as part of a job in the planning stage or while it is under way. Be careful about that. Determine who must pay the cost.

- Know the proposed schedule of the project. Know how long it will take so you can tell owners what to expect. Communicate with owners on the status.

- Keep a project on track with frequent visits to the work area.

"I don't care how good a contractor is; if you're not there watching him, you will be unpleasantly surprised," Falzone said.

If a contractor disappears from an unfinished job, you might have to ask your attorney to intercede. "I give [the contractor] maybe two phone calls and a dirty look, and that's it. Then, I get the attorney after him."

Inspect the work carefully to be sure it is up to the standards you expect. It's at this point that Falzone suggests that a professional be brought in to look at the work if the board or management lacks the capability to accurately evaluate its quality.

"If you're not sure, hire an expert to look at it," she said. "Don't be afraid to spend the money if you need to."

- Delay the last payment to the contractor or retain part of a lump-sum single payout until you are certain everything is satisfactory.

"We hold a 10 percent retention for 30 days following completion," Whitman said. When contractors know they won't be paid in full until the work is completely acceptable for the association, that is an incentive for them to fully meet their contract obligations.

- Get all guarantees and warranties for the work. Falzone has a favorable attitude toward contractors who follow up on warranties. She will give them future jobs even though their work had to be corrected.

"I like to use contractors who did it wrong the first time and came back to fix it for no cost," she said. That reflects integrity, an important trait for a contractor.

Free-lance writer David Mack can be reached by e-mail at [speed14@urbancom.net](mailto:speed14@urbancom.net).

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