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Contractors: How to choose the right one

Americans spend billions of dollars on construction and home remodeling each year.

Many homeowners have discovered that improving their present residence with an updated kitchen, an additional bathroom, new windows or a new roof can be a more prudent investment than purchasing a new residence. However, adding a room or updating a kitchen can cost more than a new car, and consumers should take some time and care in planning a costly home improvement project. **Unfortunately, most consumers spend less time choosing a contractor than they do choosing a car.**

Here is a checklist of important things to consider before starting any major construction project:

The Dos:

Do plan your project carefully.

Do shop around before hiring a contractor.

Do get at least three written bids on your project.

Do provide all contractors with accurate plans or drawings that will enable them to determine the scope and cost of work when requesting bids.

Do check with the Contractors State License Board to make sure the contractor is properly licensed, and to check the status and disciplinary history of the license.

Do check out contractors with your local building department, trade associations or unions, consumer protection agency, and the Better Business Bureau. *(continued on p. 2)*

Fall Properties

SUMMER 2005 • www.fallproperties.com

A Word from Laura:

Nothing like the 3 H's of our DC summers – hot hazy & humid. Our office remains very busy and we are keeping our cool! Many of us at Fall Properties have embarked on fun projects and events this summer – be sure to check out our office news on page 3.

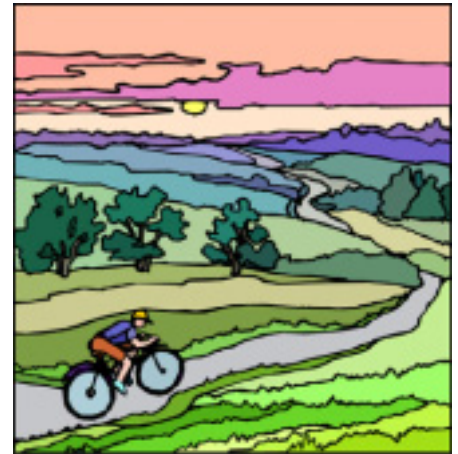
I still hear lots of rumblings and worries about a real estate bubble, but those rumblings are mainly from the media and folks worried about waiting to sell their home(s). The experts in our real estate industry remain extremely positive about the health of our market; especially in the job rich area of greater Washington DC. There has been a slight slowdown in the market since mid June, but that used to be the norm as many people are busy getting kids out of school and going on vacation. With the number of calls we have been getting from prospective buyers and sellers, I predict a very brisk fall market.

Our autumn newsletter will recap the annual economic summit at George Mason University, so I will bring you greater market details in October. Until then, if we can be of help to you or someone you know with real estate service or advice, please give us a call. We value your business and we appreciate your referrals.

Bike Trails in Northern Virginia

We're very lucky in the Washington area—there are literally hundreds of miles of scenic bike trails, with some of the best right here in Northern Virginia. Cycling is a sport the entire family can enjoy, and it comes with its own built-in breeze. That's a real plus during the summer months.

The **Mount Vernon Trail** is 18.5 miles of paved trail that begins at Roosevelt Island and runs along the Potomac River (parallel to the GW Parkway) all the way to Mount Vernon, the home of George Washington. It travels past the Navy-Marine Memorial of gulls above a wave, and the LBJ Memorial Grove – the view of the DC skyline is lovely here. At Gravelly Point, you can see the planes take off and land at Reagan National Airport. Daingerfield Island is a good spot for a picnic while watching sailboats moving in and out of the marinas along the Potomac. And this trail passes right through Old Town Alexandria. Don't forget to stop for an ice cream cone.



The **Washington & Old Dominion Trail (W&OD)** is 45 miles of trail built on the roadbed of the former W&OD Railroad running through urban areas and countryside from Shirlington near 395 to Purcellville in Loudoun County. The entire 45 miles is paved with 9 foot wide asphalt and a painted yellow center line. There's also 32 miles of adjacent gravel trail for horseback riding. The W&OD Trail passes through Falls Church, Vienna, Reston, Herndon, Ashburn and Leesburg. *(continued on p. 2)*

(Contractors continued from p.1)

Do ask your contractor to furnish a completion or contract bond.

Do consult with more than one lending institution regarding the type of loan to obtain.

Do make sure your contract provides for a “retention” – a percentage of each payment or of the total job, ordinarily 10 percent, which you retain until the job is completed.

Do make sure everything you and your contractor have agreed to is included in your contract, and don't sign anything until you understand and agree with all of the terms.

Do ask your contractor about inconveniences that may occur, and plan accordingly.

Do keep a job file.

Do make sure you receive unconditional lien releases from subcontractors and material suppliers.

Do make frequent inspections of the work, including a final walk through.

Do consult an attorney if a mechanic's lien is filed against your property.

Do negotiate with the contractor first if problems or disagreements occur.

The Don'ts:

Don't hire an unlicensed contractor.

Don't hire a contractor without first shopping around.

Don't act as an owner/builder, unless you are very experienced in construction.

Don't sign anything until you completely understand it and agree to the terms.

Don't make agreements with subcontractors or workers without consulting the prime contractor.

Don't pay cash without a proper receipt.

Don't make a down payment that exceeds the legal limit – usually ten percent.

Don't let your payments get ahead of the contractor's completed work.

Don't hesitate to ask questions of the contractor.

Don't make final payment until you are satisfied with the completed job



Got Company???

If your friends and relatives are descending on you, here is a list of things (from About.com) they should see and do while they're here. There's more than one visit can accomplish, and probably some things you haven't experienced yourself, so be a tourist right along with them!

Visit the Smithsonian Institution. Start at The Castle, where you can get a map and information on all of the museums. They cover a myriad of topics, and include the Air & Space Museum, the Hirshhorn, the Natural History Museum

and Discovery Theater. You could spend an entire vacation just touring these collections.

Tour the monuments. They are spectacular, especially at night when they're lit up. If you go in the daytime, take a tour bus. You won't have to worry about traffic, and the tour guide will tell you about the sights.

Tour the three houses of government. The U.S. Capitol Building, the White House and the U.S. Supreme Court represent the division of power in this democracy. Plan ahead for these.

Walk through Georgetown. This historic waterfront is a shopper's dream come true, with an amazing array of restaurants, cobblestone streets, and sites that date back to the 1700's.

See a show at the Kennedy Center. The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts is home to the National Symphony Orchestra, and hosts all manner of dance, music, opera & theatre year round. Daily, they have free performances on the Millennium Stage at 6pm (no tickets required).

Attend a concert at Wolftrap Farm Park. This national park, dedicated to the performing arts, offers outdoor concerts all summer and indoor performances the rest of the year.

Hike in Great Falls Park. This 800 acre park has spectacular views of the Potomac River as it narrows from 1000 feet to 60-100 feet wide at Mather Gorge. This, plus a 76 foot drop in elevation over a distance of less than a mile, makes for the steepest and most amazing fall line rapids of any eastern river. What a rush!

Explore Mount Vernon. The 14-room mansion and estate of George Washington is beautifully restored and furnished with original objects that date to the 1740's.

Take a walking tour of Old Town Alexandria. The Alexandria riverfront was an important port during the colonial, revolutionary and Civil War periods. The revitalized waterfront offers cobblestone streets, colonial houses and churches, museums, shops and restaurants.

The Capital region really does offer something for everyone to see and do.

(Bike Trails continued from p.1) There are Bed & Breakfasts along the route, if you want to make a leisurely round trip. And there are bike shops and restaurants scattered all along the trail.

Since the W&OD trail ends in Shirlington, you'll want to use the 4 mile long **Martha Custis Trail** to get to the downtown DC area. It intersects with the W&OD at the 4.0 mile marker, and runs under I-66 and continues along the north side of the interstate for most of its length. You can also connect with it from the Mount Vernon Trail just above Roosevelt Island. The Custis Trail is a great short cut between the two longer trails.

These paths are busy with cyclists, walkers, joggers, and rollerskaters. The skill levels are wide ranging, but that can make for a great family outing. Pack a picnic, or just plan to stop along the way and buy your snacks. Enjoy!

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COMING SOON!



Arlington: Quintessential bungalow
5BR, 4BA – not yet priced



Falls Church:
Brick rambler
on W&OD
trail – 4BR 3BA
mid \$600's

Burke:
3BR 3.5BA
townhome in
Crownleigh
low \$400's



Fairfax: 2BR 2BA condo w/garage
in Random Hills – mid \$300's



What's Going On?

- Our office manager, Karen Haines, had a rock and roll wedding at the State Theatre on July 3. Congratulations Karen and Jeff!! They planned, produced and performed for the most fun wedding any of us have ever attended. There were 6 bands (including the bride and groom), a video presentation short story on 2 giant screens, and even a stage entrance of the bride and groom on a tandem bicycle. If you have an important party to throw, you should seriously think about hiring Jeff and Karen to make yours as memorable as their wedding.



- Danielle Snyder, one of our part time administrative assistants, graduated from Jeb Stuart HS and will be attending George Mason University this fall – way to go Dannie! Our other part timer, Casey Milch, is a rising 2nd year student at Marymount University. We are so grateful and fortunate to have them both here at Fall Properties.

- I am practicing what I preach, and have bought a home with my husband, Vaughn Collins. This is our first home together and we are as excited as every new homeowner is. We are moving from Falls Church to Arlington – both of us will be closer to our jobs and our dog Luna will enjoy the great walking trails of Donaldson Run & the Potomac.

- We have two clients that have published books recently. Let me recommend the following books and authors to you:

Claude Berube has co-authored a newly published naval history book, A Call to the Sea. This is a biography of Captain Charles Stewart, who served longer (sixty-three years) than any officer in American naval history. Stewart served every president from John Adams to Abraham Lincoln. I've just started this book and it is well written and really interesting!

Due out this October is Tracy Melton's novel, Hanging Henry Gambrill: The Violent Career of Baltimore's Plug Uglies, 1854-1860. I've got my copy on order and am looking forward to reading this fascinating chapter of Baltimore history!



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Did You Know? Money Magazine & CNN/Money named Vienna, Va Number 4 on their Best Places to Live 2005 list! More info is available at <http://money.cnn.money/best/bplive/>

CURRENT MORTGAGE INTEREST RATES

<i>30 year fixed</i>	5.625%
<i>30 year Jumbo loan</i>	5.875%
<i>5/1 ARM</i>	5.25%
<i>7/1 ARM</i>	5.5%
<i>7/1 Jumbo ARM</i>	5.75%

New Conforming loan limit is \$359,650;
Jumbo loans are all amounts over.

INTEREST ONLY LOANS

Becoming a very popular choice for today's buyers – they can afford more house or enjoy lower mortgage payments. Call for more information.

<i>3/1 ARM</i>	5.25%
<i>5/1 ARM (Jumbo)</i>	5.625%

SOME TIPS FOR KEEPING COOL IN CAC

Since we're in the Dog Days of Summer, we thought you could use some tips for getting the most out of your air conditioning.

- Clear furniture away from the AC vents.
- Close unused rooms and their vents.
- Weatherstrip doors and windows, and make sure any ducts that pass through the attic are well insulated.
- Set the fan on low in humid weather to remove moisture from the air.
- Keep heat producing appliances away from the thermostat.
- Keep windows closed and drapes & blinds drawn.
- Use kitchen & bath exhaust fans sparingly.
- Limit cooking & laundering to early morning or late evening.
- Cover pots and pans to avoid humidity and cook food faster.
- Replace your filters and clean your vents.

August is notorious for being hotter than July...this year that could mean record-breaking temperature & humidity. Try to stay cool, and we'll see you in the Fall.

