

# Homeowners beware of driveway firms with cheap deals

Ontario homeowners are being warned to be wary of driveway paving companies offering rock bottom prices.

In particular, government officials caution consumers to be on the watch for travelling salespeople waving bargain banners and hitting entire neighborhoods with high pressure sales pitches for driveway paving services.

"It's like a carnival descending on the community, as these salespeople pop from house to house, trumpeting news of fabulous prices and drumming up business from homeowners who don't have any desire or need for driveway repairs," says Roberta Allan of the Ontario Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations (MCCR). "The worst thing is that the prices offered are usually totally unrealistic and the jobs cannot possibly be done well at such low cost."

Reputable pavers claim their unethical counterparts quote prices that are even lower than the base cost of a proper job before allowing for profits. To make money, these firms may skimp on materials and cut corners, leaving customers with inferior driveways, Allan says. Some are outright con artists who only stay around long enough to collect hundreds of dollars in deposits, disappearing before work begins.

In a continuing effort to protect Ontario consumers and put disreputable companies out of business, the ministry has published a set of guidelines established in co-operation with respected industry members. Emphasizing the caution about door-to-door sellers, MCCR's Residential Driveway Paving Fact Sheet also explains how to choose a good company, what to include in contracts and how to arrange payments.

"For example, it's absolutely vital to keep deposits to 10 per cent at the most," Allan explains. "You should also be sure to get at least three quotes from reputable companies. Finding a few good firms may involve getting recommendations or checking with local business associations. Whatever it takes to find a reliable contractor, it's worth the effort."

To help consumers better understand what

they should be buying, the fact sheet explains the differences between regrading, resurfacing and excavation work. Materials used by pavers are discussed in terms of quality and quantity.

"In most cases, a good driveway is made up of six inches of compacted base stone, topped with two inches of compacted asphalt - grade HL3 is best for most purposes," Allan says. "The amounts of materials may vary slightly with the type of job. If your existing base is not being removed, base stone won't be mentioned in the contract."

However, before signing any contract, be sure it lists all materials to be provided, stipulating "depth after compaction," says the consumer expert.

By simply omitting the words "after compaction" unethical companies may get away with providing less than the required amounts of stone or asphalt. According to Allan, this scam is the source of profits for many bad operators and the cause of problems for many unwary consumers.

The paving facts sheet also provides information on completion times, care of new driveways, symptoms of poor workmanship, warranties, the use of soil sterilants to combat weeds and other details homeowners should understand before hiring a contractor.

"You're just asking for major headaches and expense if you get into a paving job without doing the necessary research," says Allan.

Residents who feel they have been misled by a company should contact the nearest Consumer Services Bureau of the ministry.

Paving contracts arranged in your home can be cancelled by sending a registered letter to the company within two clear working days of the signing date.

To obtain a free copy of the Residential Driveway Paving Fact Sheet, contact the Consumer Information Centre, 555 Yonge St., Toronto, Ontario M7A 2H6 - (416) 963-1111 or toll free at 1-800-268-1142. Ontario residents with an 807 area code may call the 416 number collect.

## Be prepared beginning your home renovations

Homeowners planning renovations can get started on the right footing by researching the work involved in the job before hiring a company to carry it out.

There are many sources of information on renovations. Explanations of construction techniques could be as handy as the local library, although advice on certain topics such as new building materials, may prove elusive without a bit of detective work.

"But dust off your Sherlock Holmes cap and you'll find it was worth the effort," says Roberta Allan of the Ontario Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations (MCCR). "Too many people think only do-it-yourselfers need to know how renovations are done. Then they find themselves unable to deal effectively with contractors or tradespeople because they don't understand what's going on."

"This frustrates everyone, can cause expen-

sive misunderstandings and also makes the consumer a prime target for unethical contractors."

In addition to indentifying the major steps involved in the job, homeowners should be sure they understand all their legal responsibilities in terms of contracts, permits, payment schedules, insurance and other issues, Allan says.

All Ontario residents have access to the following sources of information on home renovations. If these people can't help, they probably know who can:

-municipal government building departments - Your local municipality's building inspectors can advise you about building, plumbing, fire and electrical code regulations. They are the people to see about such important legal details as permit requirements, zoning and how much space to leave between the lot line and that new porch. Building department staff can usually provide free general advice on common construction concerns.


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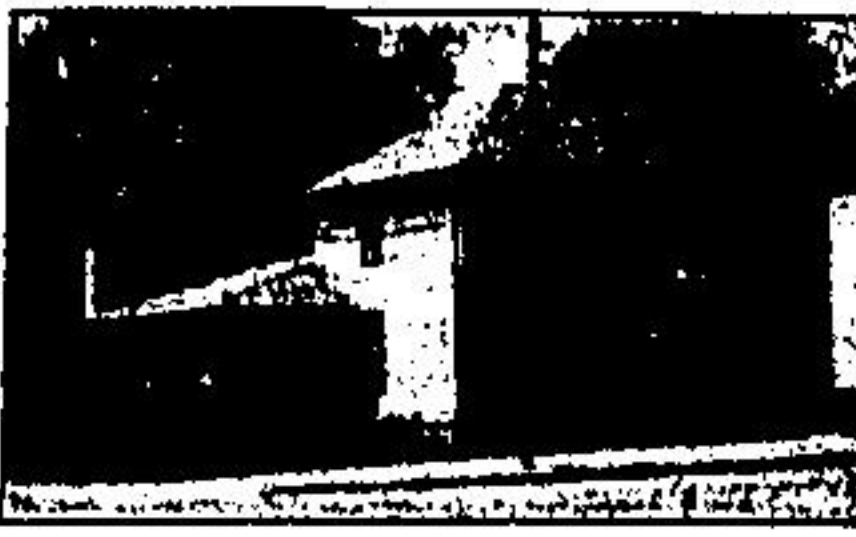
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