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Hire a Pro

But don't shy away from doing some home repairs yourself

By Chris Lavin



Mark Shaw works on a sticking interior door at his home in Orinda. Photos Chris Lavin

Now that winter weather has struck, homeowners are looking around their houses for those repairs that just didn't get done over the summer, but need attention.

"Hire a pro," says Mark Shaw, who calls himself a realtor and a violinist in the same breath, "but there are some things you can handle yourself."

Shaw says that if a homeowner has done nothing to their home for 10 years, and made no repairs, then it's likely the owner is looking at \$5,000 in repairs - and that's the low end.

Shaw gives free home maintenance seminars at the Lafayette Library twice a year, one focusing on the exterior, the other on the inside. His most recent crowd was there for advice mainly for particular problems: A persistent shower leak that hasn't been fixed by three consecutive repairmen ("water damage is the worst, you can't let that go"), furnace problems ("make sure you're not heating your attic"), and a handful of widows who were looking for guidance now that their husbands aren't around to oversee repairs.

"It's interesting," Shaw said, "that when you've lived in a house for a long time, and especially if you live alone, things start to need attention, and you might think everything looks just fine. But it doesn't to someone coming in for the first time. I see it all the time." To illustrate his point, Shaw brought along a slide show with a lot of nasty pictures of things living in our carpets, horrible close-ups of parasites that ride in on our pets, and messy insulation that has fallen away from ducts.

While this list is by no means comprehensive, Shaw hit some high points:

- Have your furnace inspected and hire a chimney sweep to vacuum out your heating ducts. At the same time, replace your furnace filters every two to three months, or get a permanent filter that you can hose down every few months.

- Get a carbon monoxide detector, pronto. "If you do not have one of these then go straight from here to the hardware store and buy one today." That warning was accompanied by a huge skull and crossbones, to the tune of an ominous Dvorak violin concerto. And use the fan over your propane oven range, even if it sounds like a jet engine. The carbon monoxide detectors aren't expensive, and one will do, installed down low in a hallway, for example.

- And clean range vents, filters and ducts while you're at it.
- Make sure your clothes dryer is venting properly. Clogged dryer vents are the leading cause of house fires, he said. (And yes, Shaw displays a truly terrifying image of a house engulfed in flames.)
- Check your smoke detectors, even the hard-wired ones.
- Clean your garage. "America has the only culture in the world where people will spend tens of thousands of dollars on a car, and then park it outside," he said.
- Consider buying a home warranty. Warranties cost about \$400 a year, he said, and will cover the repair of any major appliance on your property. And if it can't be repaired, the insurer will replace it. A woman asked if the insurer will come to the house to inspect, first, to see how old her appliances are. "Nope," was Shaw's answer.
- Buy a really powerful vacuum - "one that will try to suck the carpet right off the floor."
- If your attic isn't insulated, consider getting it done. "That's the biggest bang for your buck."

His audience came away exhausted, but relieved.

"This was so helpful," said Eve Guinan-Blaney, who feels slightly overwhelmed by keeping up her Lafayette house. "Especially for the elderly like me."

Shaw will happily send his exterior and interior home repair list to anyone who emails him. He can be reached at mark@markshawrealtor.com.



Two perpendicular layers of stone wool insulation batts were easy to install in this Moraga home. Photo Andy Scheck



Kai Rochette washes off the furnace filter for his family's home in Canyon.



These permanent furnace filters can be rinsed down with a hose - no need to buy new filters.

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