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Focus on Real Estate

Removing Popcorn Ceilings Not Easy It's also not always necessary

By Russ Zabel

During the recent flap about Environmental Protection Agency's decision to yank warnings about the dangers of asbestos insulation in homes, one source of the deadly mineral wasn't mentioned: popcorn ceilings.

A legacy of the 1970s, the spray-on treatment gives ceilings a pebbled look. But the lumpy bits are made of asbestos, and getting rid of the retro decorating touch can be extremely hazardous to people's health, according to the Puget Sound Clean Air Agency (PSCAA).

"Leaving the stuff alone is our first recommendation," said Mike Schultz, a spokesman for the PSCAA, which by law must OK all projects involving removal of popcorn ceilings.

Normally, a popcorn ceiling doesn't pose a hazard unless the ceiling is coming down or holes are knocked in it, he said. "Even if it's not painted, it shouldn't be a problem," Schultz added.

However, getting rid of popcorn ceilings often comes up with remodeling project.

"Some people feel, for aesthetic reasons, that they want it removed," he said.

That triggers a decision about whether homeowners want to tackle the job themselves or hire someone to do the work. "We recommend that you always use a contractor," Schultz said. The contractor has to be certified by the state to handle asbestos removal, and using one can be an expensive proposition, he conceded.

Carl Dykstra, Manager of Partners Construction Inc., said his Kent-based company charges between \$2.75 and \$6.75 per square foot to remove popcorn ceilings. "It depends on the layout of the house," he said. The cost shoots up if the ceilings are vaulted, for example, or in hard-to-reach locations, Dykstra said.

Using Partners Construction figures, it would cost between \$2,200 and \$5,400 to clean an 800-square-foot ceiling, and many people can't afford to pay that much, Schultz said. "So the question becomes, can they do it safely?"

According to the PSSA website (www.pscleanair.org), removing popcorn ceilings involves wetting the stuff down and scraping it off. However, doing-it-yourselfers can't simply put on some

grubbies and start hacking away.

They have to take precautions because, when asbestos is disturbed, it breaks down into fibers that are 1,200 times thinner than a human hair and can cause a host of fatal lung diseases if inhaled. There is no known safe level of exposure, according to PSCAA.

So people doing the work themselves need to cover floors and walls in layers of plastic sheeting, and they need to wear protective gear that includes a respirator with a HEPA filter, hooded jumpsuit, rubber gloves, boots and goggles. The debris, plastic sheeting and most of the work outfit have to be properly disposed of at a hazardous-waste transfer station.

Contractors also use a blower that sucks air out of the homes through HEPA filters, and their projects must be inspected by the state's Department of Labor and Industries, Dykstra said.

The specialized blowers are not available to do-it-yourselfers, Schultz said. He also said that only owners of single-family, detached homes can do the work themselves. Owners of condominiums need to hire contractors. "If you do it wrong, you can create problems for someone else," Schultz explained.