

Home Improvement Planning

Home sweet home – This article will help to guide you through the thought process of a home improvement project. The Upper Valley area is a place with spectacular winters. It is fun to see the snow and play in it. It is also a great time for an indoor home improvement project.

A home improvement project is a great way to spend time during the winter months and will provide you with a great sense of accomplishment. During our warm and pleasant summers you can take on that outdoor or backyard project such as a patio or built-in barbeque.

Take advantage of the great variety of weather we have in New England and plan, with the weather in mind, those great home improvement projects.

A home improvement investment can actually provide a great return on your money and provide you with greater sense of pride of ownership. It can also make your home more functional as a well thought out project customizes the home to your specific needs. If you intend to stay in it forever or if plan to move someday the chances are high that you will undertake a home improvement project (or a few of them) while you live there. Make sure you spend your money wisely.

As a homeowner you'll complete many routine maintenance and repair projects. When something breaks, you fix it. But there may be even some important improvements that you'll want to make to customize your house to your family's needs and truly make it your own. These projects can be fun and financially worthwhile if thought out properly.

The features and key aspects of a home changes as you and your family change. Things that are important to young family become less so as children grow and move out of the home. It is likely that you and your family will experience many changes in lifestyle, family dynamics and personal preferences. The house you bought a few years ago may not continue to suit your family's changing needs.

The solution is to make changes that you'd like to make, stay within your budget and do all this while keeping an eye on your home as an investment. This is not a simple task, but by following a few solid guidelines you'll be able to have confidence in your decisions and enjoy the results of a well thought out and managed project.



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Your First Step

Take an inventory of all the maintenance projects large and small that need to be done. Pay particular attention to the following:

- **Mechanical Systems** — Plumbing, wiring, heating and cooling must be maintained in top working order. Make repairs or upgrades as necessary to ensure that these systems work efficiently. Dripping faucets and inefficient air conditioning systems will only cost you money — faulty wiring can be a very serious issue if not addressed.
- **Structure** — Maintain the roof, foundation, walls, floors, doors, windows, stairways, decks and the insulation that surrounds them. Inspect for leaks (water and air) and cracks, peeling paint, etc. Be sure that your home's "skeleton" is clean, weather-tight and structurally sound. Also, check for pests, either small furry ones or those of the insect variety. Sealing a home against pests, water and wind is a very important maintenance item. We live in an environment that takes it toll over time. A properly sealed house is very important.
- **Cosmetic** — Additional important aspects are the things that make a home truly yours. Look at interior/exterior paint, floor coverings, wall coverings, landscaping, etc. and keep them updated and fresh.

Keeping your home in good working order not only keeps your household running, but also saves you money and prolongs the life of your home. Doing regular maintenance will also serve you well when it comes time to sell your home, since these are the areas that potential buyers evaluate first. I know that I always check for basic maintenance first and the modern home buyer often does a building inspection. A building will always look at basic maintenance and it reflects poorly on the home and the home owner if the home is not maintained well.

Priorities — Wants versus Needs

Make a list of all the things that could be done to customize your home for your family. Talk this out with family members to get their inputs. Try to make an honest assessment of how you really live, paying attention to your habits and the family's lifestyle. Consider:

- **Having People Over** — Are your gatherings for large groups or small? Do you like a big kitchen where people can gather?



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- **Activities** — Do you need extra room for projects? What does the family do for sports or hobbies?
- **Storage** — Are you a collector? Do you need seasonal storage? It is always wise to consider proper storage for pool supplies, yard tools or the children's outdoor toys.
- **Dining** — Do you prefer formal, informal or both?
- **Sleeping Areas** — Do you have to only accommodating your own family, or do you need extra space to house visiting friends or relatives?
- **Private spaces** — This is important for all family members. Is there room for everyone to "get away" for a while?
- **Outdoor living areas** — Is your preference a deck or covered porch? How about a patio or even a gazebo. It is a great additional to any home to integrate an outdoor area into the living areas.

Remember to evaluate your home in terms of those that are always there versus those who only visit a few times a year. If you are an "empty nester" with family members who only come home during the holidays, your housing needs are different than they were a few years ago. Your changing family situation should be a consideration as to where you want to spend your home improvement dollars.

After reviewing your lists, prioritize your ideas. Sometimes setting a priority is easy. If you need space to sleep five in a two-bedroom house, then it only makes sense to postpone the new deck. Sometimes priorities may be set based on personal choice. For example you may decide to add a fireplace and built-ins to the family room this year and build the new sun room the next.

Family dynamics should be considered to define the scope of some projects. If your son is going off to college soon then you soon may have some extra space. If you become the caretaker for an aging family member then first floor space may become a priority for a bedroom over a second floor bedroom.

Changing the way your house works and flows may not involve having to add on. Look for ways to use existing space for different purposes to meet new needs. For example, you may be able to convert a bedroom into a hobby room or a home office. You may be able to use the dining room as a library by simply adding bookshelves.



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It's a good idea before you begin any major projects to establish a master plan to determine the order of execution of your projects. A plan allows you to see the big picture so you can better understand the overall impact of the changes to your house, your family and your budget.

Budgeting For Change

When budgeting for your improvements, get specific about the details of the project:

- **Planning** — Will you design your project or will you pay a designer or architect to help? Determine the scope of the project to get an overall picture of what will be involved. A detailed plan minimizes construction changes and costs.
- **Execution** — Who will actually do the work? Will you hire someone to do all or part of the job? Will you be doing most of the labor yourself? Make an honest assessment of your experience and comfort level as a do-it-yourselfer before tackling a major project. You can save a lot of money in some cases — if you know what you're doing. Depending on the difficulty of the project, labor can account for a major portion of the total budget.
- **Finish materials, fixtures, etc.** — What kind of materials will you use? Choosing marble over plastic laminate, for example, will up the cost of a countertop considerably. Explore the possibilities; then make a decision based on your preferences with consideration for your budget.

Additional costs to consider include permits, site preparation, cleaning up before and after, and time spent out of the house (you could be sleeping and/or eating elsewhere during major renovations). All of these need to be reviewed and added to the bottom line.

When setting the budget it is wise to get referrals on contractors or specialists. You should not decide based on price but also on reputation, timing and the ability to work together. I once had a person laying tile in my home for five weeks when he had committed to two. When I asked about why he was coming only in the afternoon he said he had taken on another job. He more than doubled the time in my home and three weeks of not having a kitchen in order started to play on the nerves of the family. When I looked into this after the fact I discovered that this was standard for this contractor. I was happy with the final results but it took much longer than expected.

A well thought out project list can lead to many successful and rewarding home improvement experiences. Projects can be fun and the investment in money, time and effort well worth it.



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Please always exercise reasonable caution, follow applicable codes and regulations, and check with a professional if in doubt about any procedures.

Also, we can provide you with references for contractors and specialist in the Enfield, Lebanon, Hanover, Canaan and Grafton, New Hampshire areas. Real estate is our area of expertise and real estate and home improvement are closely related. Take advantage of our great NH weather and define the right project for the right time.



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