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County offers tips for working with contractors

Sarasota County Planning and Development Services has issued a warning about hiring unlicensed workers for home improvements, and offers tips to residents for protecting themselves.

“Because of the economic downturn in recent years, many unlicensed individuals are posing as contractors,” said Gregory Yantorno, the county’s acting building official. “This phenomenon is happening all over Florida. Local building departments and the state Department of Business and Professional Regulation (DBPR) have seen a significant increase in the number of complaints received and the number of citations issued for unpermitted and/or unlicensed work.

“People need to take extra precautions to protect themselves from scams and unlicensed activity,” Yantorno added.

Warning signs that a person is unlicensed include:

- use of an unmarked commercial vehicle
- no permit posted on the site
- no license number in the ad or on their truck
- an out-of-state tag
- work performed at unusual times
- the contractor asks the homeowner to obtain the permit.

Among the tips for residents dealing with home-improvement contractors are:

- Make sure you have a signed contract that is clear and detailed and spells out who will do what where, when and for how much. Be specific about how much will be paid when certain phases of the job are completed.
- Do not give a large down payment, and do not make final payment until after you have verified that the final inspection on the permit has been approved.
- Get two or three estimates from different contractors, and make sure the contractors have a license showing competency in the particular job you want done. Obtain at least three recommendations and references, and check them out.
- A state license can be checked by calling the DBPR at 850-487-1395 or on the website, www.myfloridalicense.com. To report unlicensed activities to the state, call 866-532-1440.
- A Sarasota County license can be checked by calling the licensing section at 941-861-6126 or on the website, building@scgov.net.
- Do not accept a local business tax receipt as proof of contractor competency. An occupational business license issued by the Tax Collector’s office just means the holder pays taxes.
- Ask the contractor to show you copies of the contractor’s workman’s compensation and insurance policies and any bonds. Check with the licensing section to see if the policies are still in effect and whether there have been any complaints against the contractor.
- Make sure the contract has a provision that the contractor will obtain and post the permit. Ask if there is a charge for this service. You can check on the status of your permit and inspections by

visiting www.scgov.net, scrolling down the left side to click on “Permitting/Permit Status” and then clicking on “Query by Permit, People or Property.”

- If you hire an unlicensed contractor and someone gets hurt on your property, you may be held responsible and DBPR may file charges for aiding and abetting an unlicensed person.

“You will hear excuses that it takes the county weeks or even months to issue a permit,” Yantorno said. “But most permits are issued within five to 10 days. Minor plumbing, electrical, air conditioning and hurricane shutter permits are available the same day over the internet.

“Professional licensing laws exist to protect your health, safety and welfare,” he added. “Be sure to hire a licensed contractor to do any work on your property or house. Take your time. Review bids and contracts carefully. Protect your property and yourself.”

For more information, contact the Sarasota County Call Center at 941-861-5000, or visit www.scgov.net.

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