

Tips for Bathroom Renovations

Dreaming of that whirlpool tub? Rainshower? Gleaming glass tile throughout? Decorator's sink with counters and enough cabinets to hold everything? Or just a few upgrades that might preclude an all-out makeover, such as vent fan and better lighting, getting rid of that old tub box that holds the plumbing, or reglazing the tub?

We all have dreams of updating our bathrooms, bringing them into the 21st century. Some of us have moved ahead and some of us have delayed to ponder the possible pitfalls inherent in renovating our older bathrooms.

Bathrooms in Parkfairfax were last updated in the late 1970s when the former apartment complex was converted to a condominium. That was nearly 30 years ago and many residents either have or want to further update their bathrooms. Parkfairfax is an aging complex, built in the early 1940s, and some basics that we take for granted, such as electrical wiring and plumbing, often require upgrading to meet today's City building codes. Other problems only become apparent as a renovation moves along, creating surprises that can lengthen the renovation process and frustrate homeowners.

The following is an attempt to provide a guide for starting the process of renovating your bathroom, anticipating problems you may encounter during the renovation process and some thoughts from other residents who have completed renovations and from our own maintenance personnel on what works and what doesn't work in Parkfairfax bathrooms.

Paperwork and Contractors

1) Parkfairfax Applications: Fill out and submit all necessary paperwork to Parkfairfax. You do not need permission from Parkfairfax to renovate your bathroom. However, you need Parkfairfax approval and a City permit to install a vent fan. You may need other City permits as well (see below). Although you may not need approvals for simple replacement-in-place of sinks, toilets and tubs, you would need a permit from the City if relocating plumbing waste and/or water supply lines; Parkfairfax Covenants approval for work within the wall and ceiling cavities, or work on common element piping [beyond one inch into the ceiling or wall]; and from both to remove or relocate walls. To determine what approvals, if any, are necessary, call the Parkfairfax Office at 703-998-6315 or check the Parkfairfax website at <http://www.parkfairfax.info>, under "Resource Center." You can download to fill out the Covenants application form for "Non-Routine Changes" and the indemnification agreement. Also, call the Office to obtain a copy of Parkfairfax specifications to provide to your contractor. If your project also requires a City permit, you must supply Parkfairfax with a copy of the permit. Always keep a copy of the paperwork you submit to Parkfairfax.

2) Hiring a Contractor: Follow State and City advice for hiring contractors. See "What You Should Know before You Hire a Contractor," published by the Commonwealth of Virginia at: <http://www.state.va.us/dpor/brochures.htm>. The homeowner is responsible for contracting with a licensed and insured contractor who will obtain the necessary

permits. The homeowner needs to be comfortable with the contractor's qualifications. Check the contractor's references, your neighbors, the Better Business Bureau and local consumer agencies. Also, Parkfairfax has a book of references in the office. Please be aware that you must provide Parkfairfax with your contractor's licensing information when you submit your paperwork.

3) City Permits: Follow State and City guidelines to determine if you need a permit, who should get (pull) the permit and how to confirm that the permit was pulled. To determine if a permit is necessary, see:

<http://www.alexandriava.gov/city/codeenforcement>. This site will allow you to determine if you need a permit, to apply for a permit, and to determine if the permit was issued. This website also will provide a record that the City Inspector approved the work after they completed their inspection. You can also contact the Alexandria Code Enforcement Office at 703-838-4360.

4) Good Neighbor Policy: Be considerate of your neighbors. Notify your neighbors ahead of time of anticipated work and noise, especially those who are home during the day. The City sets limits on the time of day and days of the week a contractor can perform work, generally between 7:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. on weekdays, and between 9:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. on Saturdays. Contractors are not allowed to perform work on Sundays and Holidays. For more on the noise ordinance:

http://alexandriava.gov/city/codeenforcement/noise_violations.html

Also be aware of odors, trash/debris in the yard, unplanned "emergency" water/gas shut-offs (see below), drilling through walls into another unit, and heavy hammering that could cause cracks in neighboring walls and ceilings that could adversely impact your neighbors.

Electrical/Plumbing

CAUTION: Do not drill holes all the way through a wall unless you are sure of what is in the wall and on the other side. Do not remove any pipe or wire unless you are sure of what it is. Small plaster repairs in walls can be done with ready-made plaster patches purchased at any hardware store. Larger repairs will probably require someone with plastering experience.

1) Upgrades to Date: When Parkfairfax was converted to condominiums in 1978, the developer replaced some but not all of the electric wiring. The old hot water heating pipe was abandoned in place and an electric wall heater was installed in each bathroom. For plumbing, the developer replaced the hot and cold water supply piping completely within the buildings, the inner workings of the toilet was replaced, the waste/drain piping that is directly beneath the basin bowl and the basin faucet were replaced, and a new tub/shower diverter with shower head assembly and a wall mounting box was installed. A storm window was installed on the interior side of the old casement window; the walls and ceiling were painted and that was about it.

The developer did not replace the toilet, the basin and pedestal, the medicine cabinet and wall mounted light fixture, or the bath tub. Only very minimal ceramic tile repairs were

made- basically to accommodate entries required for the new copper piping. The waste piping serving the toilet, the tub drains, and the stack piping within the wall were also not replaced.

2) Electrical Wiring: Caution—residents cannot cut pipes and electrical lines serving neighbors. Parkfairfax units received some minor upgrades after conversion but much of the wiring is over 60 years old. Should you plan installations requiring additional wiring, you may need to upgrade your electric circuit box. Work only with licensed technicians and insist that City codes are followed and that permits and inspections obtained if they are required. For ex., City code now requires safety outlets protected by Ground Fault Circuit Interrupters (GFCI) in bathrooms.

3) Exhaust fan vents: Do not discharge dryer and exhaust fan vents into attics, crawlspaces or wall cavities. Ask for Parkfairfax specifications; City electrical permit required.

4) Heating: Heaters can be replaced with new fan heaters, electric baseboards, heat lamps or combination vent/heaters. Consult your electrician.

5) Plumbing: The emergency water shut-off valves for the sink may be so inconveniently located that you may not be able to easily reach them and/or they may not work. Consult your plumber about the depth of the sink. One of the single most important upgrades recommended by Parkfairfax is to install new shut-off valves for the sink hot and cold water supply lines and for the toilet water supply. Parkfairfax plumbers have been using "ball" type valves almost exclusively with great success. Keep in mind that some of the utility pipes passing through your unit may be common element pipes that also serve other units. Only Parkfairfax can install a shut-off valve on a water supply pipe (i.e., riser) that also serves other units. Never leave any portion of the plumbing waste pipes "open" for any length of time – these should be capped off until properly connected to fixtures or appliances.

6) Water Shutoff: Only Parkfairfax can shut off water to a building. If you or your contractor need to shut off your water at the building's main supply line, you are required to provide Parkfairfax one day's notice. This will provide the Office an opportunity to notify your neighbors that they will be without water for a period of time. Additional information is available at <http://www.parkfairfax.info> under "Maintenance." Also, most contractors will not enter the crawlspaces. Parkfairfax staff will shut off the water and replace faulty "riser" valves in the crawlspace as necessary. Residents are not charged for this service.

What Can Go Wrong – One Horror Story

Homeowners need to make sure their contractor is using the highest quality materials and parts they can afford. Never scrimp on valves, tubing, hoses, and pipes – this is what usually fails first and causes the most damage. For example, in one new Parkfairfax kitchen, a cheap plastic hot-water supply line came loose, causing major damage to two units. The resident with the renovated kitchen was away for the day and the unit below

was vacant, so the water leak ran for quite some time before anyone noticed. This resulted in several thousand dollars' worth of repairs. Both units had major floor damage and the unit with the cheap hot-water supply line had major paint damage and needed to have the wooden staircase rebuilt. Would your insurance cover this type of problem?

7) Tubs, Sinks, Toilets: The sinks and toilets are fairly standard and easily accessible. Space, size, and piping provided are all very obvious. The main limitations are simply the size of the bathroom and space available. The main problem with the bath tub is that there is not any access panel to get to the water supply and drain piping serving the tub. If your tub is just over the crawlspace, these portions of piping will be accessible from there. If your bathroom is above your kitchen, an access hole may be required through the kitchen ceiling/bulkhead. If your bathroom is above a neighboring unit, you may have to negotiate for access and repairs with your neighbors. Keep in mind that the Association may be responsible for repairs to water supply and drain piping that is within wall and ceiling cavities. If the intent of your work is simply to locate and repair a leak- call the Association first. If you are solely remodeling, these are details that must be worked out in advance.

Construction

1) Tiles: Recommend removing old tiles if new tiles are desired. However, many residents report success in covering old tiles with new tiles. Tile removal may damage underlying walls. If new wallboard (sheetrock) is installed, please be sure that it is a water-resistant type manufactured for bathroom/kitchen applications. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to exactly match replacement ceramic tiles to the existing ones on the floors and walls. There are sure to be variances in color, shade, widths, thicknesses, etc. If your work will result in partial replacements of walls or floors, you may want to plan for complete retiling. If your contractor tells you that he can exactly match what is there, you may want to ask him to prove it first.

2) Removing Walls: A City permit and permission from Parkfairfax is always required. Exterior walls are plaster on wood lathe with very little insulation and little space/cavities over the solid brick wall. Interior walls are plaster on metal lathe, and plaster on metal lathe with sheetrock constructing the pipe chase cavity and ceiling bulkhead. An architect or structural engineer must be consulted and Parkfairfax Covenants Committee approval is required.

3) Doorways: The interior doorways are relatively narrow, no longer today's "standard." Consult your contractor about enlarging the doorways, especially for moving in a bathtub.

4) Ceilings: Drop ceilings are a good way to get a more finished look and allow recessed lighting. They conceal wiring and provide easy access for future maintenance.

5) Floors: As mentioned, the ceramic tile may be very difficult to match if repairs are needed. You may want to consider replacing the floor if major work is being considered.

6) Paint: Do not use oil-based paint as it is being phased out for environmental reasons. Provide adequate ventilation when painting—remember that your painting and floor work may emit fumes that could infiltrate neighboring units.

Installing Second Bathrooms

Occasionally done. Requires Parkfairfax applications and City electrical/plumbing permits.

DECORATOR TOUCHES

Many homeowners have considered decorator touches such as whirlpool tubs, tub reglazing, new medicine cabinets, improved lighting and, of course, new sinks, tubs with new plumbing. Although this fact sheet is not intended as design guidance, residents and maintenance personnel have a few thoughts on some of the more popular choices:

- 1) New showers with larger or multiple heads** -- easily done with help of a plumber.
- 2) Eliminating the tub plumbing “box”** -- a plumber can eliminate the box by replacing the pipes and installing them either inside or outside the wall with new hardware. Can be pricey (up to \$1000). Be aware that pipes placed inside the wall would be more difficult to access if a leak occurred.
- 3) Tub Reglazing** – completed look is attractive; lasts a few years. This fix can be an effective interim step before making the plunge to replace the tub. You may also want to check out tub liners - these may be a more effective alternative if somewhat more longevity is desired. Nothing will last as long or stay as attractive as a new tub.
- 4) Whirlpool Tubs/Jacuzzis** – not much experience in Parkfairfax with these types of tubs; would require extra plumbing and wiring.
- 5) Medicine Cabinets** – many residents have difficulty finding a new medicine cabinet that fits, either fills the “hole” or have difficulty expanding the hole, opting to place a new cabinet on the wall instead.

Final Thoughts -- Plan Ahead

Do your homework. Do not exceed the capacity of electrical wiring, water supply and waste piping. Follow City Code requirements. Have contingencies and options. Allow plenty of time. Don't wait until the last minute for anything. Measure, measure and measure once again. Be patient.

Most importantly, keep reminding yourself how beautiful your new bathroom will be when you're done!