

Tips for Kitchen Renovations

Many kitchens in Parkfairfax hark back to another era, most to a late 1960's renovation (harvest gold appliances). That was nearly 40 years ago and now many residents not only want but need to update their kitchens. 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 aspects inherent in these old brick and plaster-walled buildings only become apparent as a renovation moves along, such as uneven walls and non-standard door openings, leading to surprises that can lengthen the renovation process and frustrate homeowners.

Here are some steps necessary to start a kitchen renovation in Parkfairfax. We include some recommendations to simplify the process and some of the likely issues you and/or your contractor will want to consider or may face as you move through the renovation process:

1) Parkfairfax Applications: Submit all necessary paperwork to Parkfairfax. You do not need permission from Parkfairfax to renovate your kitchen, however, you need permission to install a dishwasher, exhaust vent, or washing machine, and to remove any 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>. Obtain a copy of Parkfairfax specifications to provide to your contractor. If your project requires Parkfairfax approval and also requires a City permit, you must supply Parkfairfax 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. The homeowner is responsible for contracting with a licensed and insured contractor who will obtain the permits. The homeowner needs to be comfortable with the contractor's qualifications. Check the contractor's references and check with the Better Business Bureau. Also, Parkfairfax has a book of references in the office.

3) City Permits: Follow State and City guidelines to determine if you need a permit, who should pull the permit, and confirm that the permit was pulled. To determine if a permit is necessary, see <http://alexandriava.gov/code/info/default.aspx?id=28672> and <http://ci.alexandria.va.us/city/codeenforcement/permittracker/> to determine if a permit was issued. This website will also provide a record that the City Inspector approved of the work after they did the inspection. Contact the Alexandria Code Enforcement Office at 703-746-4200.

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. With respect to noise, the City sets limits on the time of day, and days of the week, a contractor can perform work. Be aware 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 could adversely impact your neighbors.

5) Upgrades to Date: When Parkfairfax was converted to condominiums in 1978, the developer did not replace cabinets, countertop, floor, stove, refrigerator and basic electrical for lighting, appliances, and outlets. The developer replaced the sink, faucet, installed a garbage disposal, wall-mounted electric heater, replaced the waste piping under the sink to the stack pipe connections, replaced the hot and cold water supply piping completely within the buildings, and replaced the original fuse box with a new circuit breaker panel.

6) Electrical Wiring: Caution—residents cannot cut pipes, telephone, cable, TV 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 circuit box. If a contractor upgrades your kitchen, he/she may also be required to undertake additional upgrades (for example, the City requires a minimum number of outlets along the wall). Your outlet boxes, existing or additional, may not necessarily be easily "recessed" into your walls—discuss this option with your electrician. Work only with licensed technicians and insist that City codes are followed, and permits and inspections obtained if they are required.

7) 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 to be sure it can accommodate the garbage disposal and the waste pipes. 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. Under the Unit Services Program, Parkfairfax plumbers have been using "ball" type valves almost exclusively with great success. Follow the equipment manufacturer's recommendations for supply hoses and pipes to all fixtures and appliances, and replace those hoses and pipes according to the manufacturer's recommendations. Water supply lines and shut-off valves usually fail first and cause the most damage. Use the highest quality materials and parts you can afford – never scrimp on valves, tubing, hoses and pipes. Wire reinforced type supply hose lines are highly recommended. Keep in mind that some of the utility pipes passing through and serving units are 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 pipes "open" for any length of time – these should be capped off until properly connected to fixtures or appliances.

8) 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.

9) Gas Stoves: Owners must ensure that the contractor is licensed with the City. City Code requires permits for gas pipe and gas valve replacements. Most stoves have their gas connection at places far from the current location, generally requiring some re-piping by the appliance installer. Most installers will also replace the old shut-off valve and make the connection to the new stove with a flexible pipe. Do not do "quick change" gas stove valve replacements—you must schedule a gas shut off with Parkfairfax. To facilitate gas range and valve replacements in your unit, only Parkfairfax personnel are allowed to shut off the gas at a valve in the crawlspace. (The piping and valve is not labeled and if an untrained person shuts off the wrong valve, they could easily turn off the gas to as many as seven buildings.) Parkfairfax requires 10 days' notice prior to your contractor's scheduled gas stove work. There is a \$45 charge. Parkfairfax will notify affected residents and ensure all keys are on hand to gain entry to re-light all pilot lights in adjoining units. Once the installer has replaced the required piping and replaced the valve, staff will turn the gas back on.

10) Exhaust fan vents: Do not discharge dryer and exhaust fan vents into attics, crawlspaces or wall cavities. Ask for Parkfairfax specifications and remember to have your contractor pull the necessary City permits.

11) 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. 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 more plastering experience.

12) Doorways: The interior doorways are relatively narrow. Consult your contractor about enlarging the doorways, which could be especially important if you choose to buy a larger refrigerator or corner cabinet.

13) Cabinets: Kitchen floors, plaster walls and ceiling -- nothing is square, level or even. Do not expect to find wooden studs in the wall, joists in the ceiling, or any other pre-installed anchors or supports for anything you want to install. Do not expect a simple screw or nail in a plaster wall to hold anything. Ask your contractor to leave the area in back of the cabinets open where the pipes go into the wall so Parkfairfax can access the pipes if necessary. It's difficult for "Lazy Susan" type corner cabinets to have an open back.

14) 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.

15) Floors: The kitchen floor may have vinyl asbestos tiles at a deeper level and this should be mentioned to anyone replacing the floor. It is perfectly all right to overlay a vinyl asbestos tiles floor.

16) 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.

17) 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 kitchen will be when you're done!