

Pitch in and save money



Homeowners capable of pitching in on home renovation projects can save substantial amounts of money on labor costs.

Home improvement projects can be expensive. While the size and complexity of a project will affect how expensive the project is, homeowners can expect to shell out a pretty penny when they renovate or remodel areas of their home.

According to HomeAdvisor, an online resource for homeowners looking to connect with home improvement, maintenance and repair professionals, the average bathroom remodeling project costs \$9,348, while the average home addition costs slightly less than \$41,000. But renovation-minded homeowners

need not reconsider their commitment to remodeling, as there are various ways to cut the costs associated with home improvement projects.

One such way is for homeowners to pitch in and do some of the work themselves. Calculating labor costs can be difficult, as such costs can vary greatly depending on the project, the contractor and the amount of hired help that contractor intends to employ. However, some estimates suggest labor will account for anywhere from 25 to 50 percent of the overall cost of the project. So it's no surprise that homeowners can save them-

selves substantial amounts of money by doing some of the work themselves.

Homeowners who intend to do some of the labor themselves should discuss this plan with contractors during the vetting process. Before hiring a contractor, make sure homeowners' expected labor contributions are clearly defined in the contract.

While it's best to leave the most complicated parts of a project to the professionals, homeowners can pitch in during the following phases.

- **Demolition:** Demolition involves more than picking up a sledgehammer and swing-

ing away. Some demolition projects are best left to the pros. For example, any projects that involve exposure to hazardous materials are risky and therefore best left to experienced laborers. However, many homeowners are capable of safely and effectively pulling cabinets from walls, removing flooring or knocking down drywall. Homeowners unsure of how to approach demolition tasks can ask their contractors to demonstrate the proper technique so the demolition is done right and on time.

- **Salvage:** Removing debris and items that will no longer be needed once the renovation is complete is another way homeowners can pitch in. Homeowners remodeling their kitchens may be replacing their existing stoves and refrigerators and hoping to donate these items. In such instances, driving the items to the donation site or arranging for them to be picked up rather than taken off the premises by the contractor or his employees can cut labor costs, as it allows laborers to keep working toward the end goal rather than requiring them to leave the work site to drop unwanted items off.

- **Cleanup:** Homeowners also can save costs by cleaning up after the contractors at the end of each workday. Speak with the contractor about cleaning up the site each day, asking him or her what can be discarded and what must remain on-site.

Home improvements are costly. But homeowners who are capable of pitching in can greatly reduce the overall cost of their next renovation project.



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Energy assistance for low-income Minnesotans still available



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Commerce offers tips to stay warm and safe during our extended winter

A record April snowstorm and cold temperatures mean Minnesotans need to keep the heat on to stay warm and safe.

For those who are struggling to pay their heating bills, the Minnesota Commerce Department urges residents to apply for the state's Energy Assistance Program.

Heating assistance funds are still available, but are limited and households receive assistance on a first-come, first-served basis. Applications are accepted until May 31.

For information, visit the Minnesota Energy Assistance Program on the Minnesota Commerce Department

website (mn.gov/commerce) or call 800-657-3710.

The Cold Weather Rule that protects Minnesotans from natural gas or electricity shut-off ended on April 15. To avoid disconnection now, customers who still owe on their heating bill should contact their utility and ask to continue their payment plan or establish a new payment plan.

For more information on the Cold Weather Rule, visit the Public Utilities Commission website, email consumer.puc@state.mn.us or call (651) 296-0406 or 800-657-3782.

Put health and safety first

With the recent heavy snowfall, Minnesotans are also advised to protect their health and safety by checking that their homes are properly vented.

In homes with high-efficiency furnaces and other combustion appliances that vent through an exterior sidewall, proper venting is essential. To prevent dangerous back-drafting of carbon monoxide and keep appliances operating safely, follow these tips.

- Check vents regularly to make sure they are not blocked.
- Keep vents clear and free of any snow or ice.
- Make sure carbon monoxide detectors are working throughout the house. Minnesota law requires these alarms in every single-family and multifamily dwelling.

A well-functioning, older, less-efficient furnace that vents through the chimney will usually create exhaust temperatures that are hot enough to melt any snow that might collect on the chimney. But it is a good idea to check chimneys and rooftop vents (such as on mobile homes) to make sure they are not snow clogged.

How to apply for energy assistance

The Commerce Department administers the Energy Assistance Program in partnership with 30 local service providers throughout the state. The program is funded through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Energy assistance is available for renters and homeowners earning at or below 50 percent of the state's median income (\$48,077 for a family of four). Energy assistance funds go directly to the energy provider on behalf of eligible households.

The average annual grant per household is about \$520. Last year, the program helped more than 126,000 Minnesota households.

To apply for energy assistance, contact the local service provider in your county. To find your service provider, visit the Minnesota Energy Assistance Program on the Commerce website or call 800-657-3710.

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