Bathroom Remodeling – Toilets *(March, 2005)*

Here are a few thoughts about remodeling. Several people have asked me questions on that topic recently, and perhaps these ideas might be of interest to you.

There are more than a dozen floor plans here at TeleGraph Landing, but most of them repeat frequently. In the mid-rise buildings, there are stacks of identical units. In the townhouses, every unit has at least one identical twin and most have two or more. So if you're thinking about remodeling any part of your unit, I encourage you to contact the owners of units identical to yours and introduce yourself. I imagine (and hope) they will be cordial and share information with you. Ask if they have remodeled, which rooms they redid, what problems they ran into. If they were able to add a pass-through with no trouble, you won't have problems either. And if something didn't work for them, it's good to know about that too.

Besides, it's a good way to meet your neighbors.

Someone else asked about shear walls in their mid-rise unit. (A shear wall protects a building against a sideways force, and cannot be safely removed or have holes cut in it.) In the mid-rise buildings, all the interior walls are simple stud walls. The shear walls are the separators between units.

A special item to consider in remodeling is the toilet. Our original toilets use 6 gallons of water to flush, with gravity providing the flushing power. They work quite well, are silent, and use a lot of water. Various laws reduced the allowable flush water for new toilets to 1.6 gallons. If you install a new toilet made in America, it will use only 1.6 gallons. However, that's not enough water to do an efficient flush with a gravity feed. So the better new toilets use a pressure-feed system. They compress air with the existing water pressure and release the compressed air to power the flush. They're just as efficient as the original toilets, but they're noisy. Very noisy. You and all your neighbors above, below and nearby will hear it every time you flush. Especially at night.

What about low water use, but not-high-pressure toilets? They simply don't do a good job of flushing stuff down the drain. As Dave Barry says, "We've made some serious mistakes, the worst being the introduction of low-flow toilets, which clog when asked to handle anything larger than, say, a molecule."

Perhaps someday soon a good, quiet 1.6-gallon toilet will be on the market. It hasn't happened yet.

So you have a decision. You can help save the environment by conserving water or you can make your neighbors unhappy. I can tell you that the old toilets (American Standard #4049) can be reinstalled with no difficulty after a remodeling and you can discuss that with your contractor. Also, you can reduce the water use of an old toilet by either putting a plastic bottle in the tank, bending the ball-float arm downwards, or otherwise adjusting the valve system. You decide what's best.

Incidentally, one of our toilets, an original, started refilling the tank at intervals due to a slow leak from the tank chamber. I replaced the snap-on flapper valve and that fixed it for less than $4. I got mine at Steam & Plumbing on Fairfax; it's a fairly common part.

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