

Small, exterior projects give home sellers more bang for their bucks

By BoNhia Lee



The home remodeling projects with the best return for homeowners looking to sell are small improvements, like replacing an entry door, painting and landscaping. SW PARRA — The Fresno Bee

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Gone are the days of spending tons of money on major kitchen and bathroom renovations to add thousands of dollars to the price tag of a house.



The home remodeling projects with the best return for homeowners looking to sell are small improvements, like replacing an entry door or a garage door, painting and landscaping.



"The golden days are over," says Jason Farris, a Realtor with Guarantee Real Estate in Fresno. "Four or five years ago, an appraiser would give you more money if you had granite countertops or new appliances. Nowadays, we're not seeing that."

Farris says cleanliness and curb appeal are the keys to getting every dollar of what the house is worth (and a little more if you're lucky) now that home prices are slowly on the rise after plummeting in the downturn.

"If a home doesn't show well or is not well cared for, then you're going to get offers that are lower than market value," Farris says.

Realtors nationwide ranked small, exterior home projects as the most valuable in the Remodeling 2015 Cost vs. Value Report compiled by Hanley Wood's Remodeling Magazine. Hanley Wood is a real estate research firm.

The report compares changes in home improvement costs with Realtors' perceptions of how those projects contribute to the sale price of a home.

The No. 1 improvement with the best return may come as a surprise: adding stone veneer to the outside of a house. The average cost of replacing 300 square feet of vinyl siding with manufactured stone veneer in Fresno is \$7,000, the report says, with nearly 96% of the cost recouped upon resale.

Then comes the garage door, entry door and window replacements, which yield anywhere from an 80% to 85% return.

Clovis homeowner Tamera Shoemaker and her husband, Dave, considered selling their 1,500-square-foot home two years ago, but decided to wait for home prices to rise. In the meantime, they slowly renovated their house before putting it up for sale on Jan. 10.

The couple replaced the aging siding and stucco. They painted the interior walls a neutral tan, put in baseboards, chair railings, new floors, changed the tile in the bathroom and refurbished the kitchen.

"When we said, 'OK, we know eventually we want to move up to a larger home,' we made a list of things we thought would improve or increase the value, but also that we wanted to do," Shoemaker said.

The upgrades helped.

"We purchased in 2002-03 and we're getting about \$5,000 less than what we purchased it for," Shoemaker said. "If you don't look at that and look at where the market is currently, I think we are getting a good price for what we have."

The house is in escrow for the asking price of \$265,000.

"Home prices have continued to slowly move upward, and more and more homeowners are finding they have enough equity in their homes to move up to larger ones," Farris says. But, he cautions homeowners that the margins are still tight, so don't spend money on something that isn't going to give a fair return.

Here is what local housing experts and the national report say are the best home improvement projects for your money:

First impressions

The first thing sellers can work on is "curb appeal, curb appeal, curb appeal," Farris says.

That means clean and manicured lawns, new paint if needed and adding some flowers.

Front door

A new front door is "a lot more inviting," says Will Youpel, a Fresno real estate agent with Century 21 C. Watson in Fresno.

He suggests a drive through the northeast Fresno neighborhoods around Cedar and Sierra avenues where many homeowners have updated the 1970s-era homes with new roofs, windows and doors. Check out how good the leaded glass doors look, Youpel says.

The average cost for a mid-range steel entry door in Fresno is \$1,348, the value report says. About 82% of the cost is recouped when the home is sold.

Dual pane windows

Insulated windows reduce energy loss and buffer noise from the outside. About 70% of Farris' homebuyers ask about dual-pane windows, he says. It doesn't make or break a deal yet, but "it sure sat on their minds. It's certainly a smart upgrade for convenience."

The average cost of an upscale vinyl window replacement in Fresno is nearly \$15,000, the report says. A mid-range window project costs about \$11,250. The return is 83% and 80%, respectively.

"Dual-pane windows is probably the best investment you can make when you buy a home," Youpel says. "You can reap the benefits of it. It's not like they will go bad 20 or 30 years down the road. They won't malfunction. It's pretty minimal to repair."

Deep cleaning

It's free if you put a little muscle into it, but Fresno Realtors suggest hiring a professional. "A lot of times people get into the routine of what they clean all the time, but having a fresh set of eyes of a professional will catch a lot of things that you don't," Youpel says.

Clean up scuffed baseboards and walls. Make sure ceiling fans work and are dust free.

Fresh paint

Interior paint jobs are the top requests at Home Repair Contractors, a Fresno home repair and remodeling company. "Paint and a little TLC can go a long way," says Nick Dvorak, who owns the company with his son, Tim.

Dvorak didn't have an estimate on how much the average interior paint job can cost, but says most homeowners stick to painting the living areas of their home.

Kitchen and bath remodels

Start working on cleaning and painting, then move to the big-ticket items if you must, the housing experts say. Resurface or paint dull and water-stained kitchen or bathroom cabinets and replace outdated hardware. Then buy new appliances before installing countertops, Farris says. "Everyone has opinions on countertops. Appliances are universal. Nobody wants to go buy a new appliance once they move into a new home."

The average cost of a mid-range kitchen remodel in Fresno is about \$21,000, the report says, with 78% of the cost returned at sale.

Once the kitchen's in order, move to the bathroom.

Solar systems and energy upgrades

It's too soon to tell, but in a nutshell the \$30,000 solar panel won't "make you any money right now," Youpel says. It might get \$10,000 to \$15,000. It's like a pool, Youpel says, which could cost \$40,000 to build, but only get \$10,000 in return.

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