

Living

Making home maintenance relatively painless

BY LISA ZAHNER
COLUMNIST

Just about every homeowner has stumbled out of the bedroom half asleep or returned home from a trip to find something broken, flooded, leaking or just plain wrong in the house.

Whatever the malady, it's compounded by the time you know you'll spend hunting for a receipt from the last person who fixed it, or crouched over the Yellow Pages cradling the phone, calling number after number, talking to machines, pressing one for English, explaining the problem to 10 different people, and trying to get someone out to fix it sometime before your grandchildren retire.

Then there's the time off from work or play and missed appointments so you can stay home and make sure it gets done.

If it was a bad malfunction, get ready for the cleanup, repairs and repainting afterward. The tab for something like this can be staggering, and if it happens on a weekend or holiday, well sir, that spells overtime.

Even a small thing like a busted window crank or bathroom fixture can mean two trips to the hardware store, where they may or may not have the right part, plus greasy hands and aggra-



Bob Tutton reviews work orders with Rick Tritt, one of Whitehall's seven technicians.

Photos: Mark Schumann

vation if you're not naturally handy, which your wife lovingly reminds you of as you're trying to fix the darn thing.

Then a trip to the doctor to up the dose of your blood-pressure medicine after the fiasco is over.

Fortunately, there are professionals to help with basic home maintenance — and a host of other time-consuming everyday tasks in and outside the home. Hiring a company to do preventative home maintenance and inspections can't guarantee that this scenario will never happen, but they do everything in their power to prevent it, or to make the experience relatively painless for their clients when things do go wrong.

As an example of the services available to beachside homeowners, we talked to two local companies, Whitehall Professional Home Maintenance and The Caretakers.

Both firms are affiliated with trusted construction companies and both assist homeowners, but in slightly different ways.

Included in its whole-home annual contract, Whitehall offers a comprehensive array of inspection and home maintenance functions, encompassing a room-by-room program and focusing on the most minute detail of each fixture and feature of the house.

The Caretakers' annual contract concentrates on inspecting and monitoring the home and diagnosing problems. Then they contract with clients on an hourly, a la carte basis for other maintenance and personal concierge tasks.

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Whitehall Preventative Home Maintenance has been in business for 10 years and was the brainchild of Croom Construction Company principal David Croom. After building more than 900 upscale homes in Indian River County over the past 30 years, Croom saw the effects of age and the elements taking hold on what once were gorgeous houses.

tailed procedure manual to be followed for every door, window and fixture in every room of every house. When Whitehall technicians pay their first visit to a home, they inventory everything in every room that needs to be maintained.

Back at the office, checklists are created that members of the staff of seven technicians must follow to the letter

lists in hand and all the supplies and tools at their fingertips. For the average homeowner without checklists, supplies and the right tools, that amount of time could double or triple, depending on how many times you got interrupted or, distracted by, say a football game or a much-needed nap.

Maintaining a large home (the average size of a Whitehall client's home is 6,200 square feet) could easily become an all-weekend, every weekend project.

That's not the way most barrier island residents want to spend their time.

"Joe and I, being on the water, we both are really interested in taking special care of our home, but none of this would get done if it wasn't for Whitehall, because we want to enjoy the time that we're here," said Mary Alice Smith.

Smith, a 14-month client of Whitehall, signed a contract before her new

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Bob Tutton, teamed up with David Croom 10 years ago to start Whitehall Preventative Home Maintenance, a division of Croom Construction.

Much of this deterioration in quality, beauty and property value, he felt, could be prevented with systematized, regular maintenance of the home from top to bottom. Croom partnered with Bob Tutton, a 23-year veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps, to start a home maintenance division.

"We had eight different test homes for the program, model homes, homes in Orchid, Indian River Club and John's Island," Tutton said. "We would look at the house and at a door or window and say, how do you maintain this door or window?"

Tutton developed an intricate and de-

each time they visit the home, which is three times per year.

"When we send our technicians out to a client's home, they know exactly what is expected of them. New technicians are paired with senior technicians and they get on-the-job training with the manual," Tutton said. "Personality and the way they handle themselves with people are just as important as technical skills."

The average amount of time spent in the home is 120 hours per year, or 40 hours per visit.

That's 120 hours per year for a seasoned, well-trained team with check-



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Real Estate

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home was even completed. She and her husband, both retired from the pharmaceutical industry, spend nearly seven months per year in Vero and the rest of the year in New Vernon, NJ.

"I wish I had Whitehall in New Vernon, they are really interested in making my home look nice," she said. "My home still looks like it's brand new. I hope it always looks new."

David Lyons, co-owner of Whitehall and vice president of business development and marketing for Croom Construction, said preventative maintenance, especially a comprehensive and documented program such as Whitehall provides, can help owners sell their homes, when the time comes to upgrade or move.

"The local real estate professionals know about Whitehall and respect what we do," he said. "I think they know that when they're dealing with a Whitehall home, there will be fewer issues with the inspection."

Technicians generally work in teams for two or three days, depending on the size and complexity of the house. They lubricate every lock and hinge, caulk

windows, wipe down and protect any corrosive metal fixtures, check weather stripping on windows, just about any-

thing you could think of that needs to be done.

"They're really thorough, they even

clean behind the dryer," Smith said.

Then residents receive a report of maintenance done and any repairs or



Mary Alice Smith, a client of Whitehall, inspects maintenance items with Bob Tutton.



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refurbishments needed, along with a suggested timeline for those services. Tutton said he can often get clients a better deal by timing their work in a smart way.

"I can tell them when a particular subcontractor we work with might be running a special or be in a slow time," he said.

"We can also recommend the times of the year to get certain things done, such as when to paint or when to refinish mahogany doors."

The cost for this program? An annual contract starts at just less than \$1 per square foot of the house, that is square feet under roof, which includes covered porches, since maintenance work is also done on patios, in courtyards and on summer kitchens. In addition to the standard maintenance package, residents may purchase a pool maintenance package, air-conditioning maintenance package as ancillary services.

Whitehall is also available on an on-call basis for special maintenance jobs around the house.

For example, Smith had just had them refurbish all of her landscaping

lighting in preparation for a large party she was hosting in which she would be using her outdoor living space for entertaining. She has also used them to find reputable contractors to do work for her that was beyond the scope of the technicians.

"They're so responsive, and I would trust anyone Whitehall recommended to me," Smith said. "It's worth it for the peace of mind and not having to worry about managing my home."

For residents wishing to be slightly more involved in managing their own homes, The Caretakers provide a service starting at \$1,200 per year which includes monthly inspections of the home and weekly walk-throughs to check for problems when the owner is away.

The Caretakers also photograph the house using thermal imaging to point out any hot spots, literally, any places where outlets are overloaded or heat is seeping into the house and sapping energy efficiency.

Owner John Huryn said the imaging is a great tool to detect problems that

even a careful manual inspection might not show.

Owner of Huryn Construction (formerly AAC Builders) on Ocean Drive, Huryn said The Caretakers grew out of the needs of the clients living in the homes that he had built, especially in Windsor, Orchid and John's Island.

"We started the company because people always called us to ask us to do things or to ask where they could get these things done," he said.

In addition to the monthly inspections and weekly walk-throughs, which are included in the annual contract, The Caretakers are available for a variety of services.

They have painters and carpenters on staff to handle odd jobs and, as Whitehall does, The Caretakers have a vast resource of local professionals who can handle projects that require special skill or expertise.

The Caretakers brochure advertises that they will help close up a home for the summer and then set everything back up again right before you come home. They will pressure clean the patio furniture, take photos before they remove it and store it, then set it up ex-

actly the same way when you head south.

They can have the refrigerator stocked, the pool turned on and heated and flowers on your table when you arrive.

They will even pick you, your family or your guests up from the airport.

Seasonal residents can also hire The Caretakers to prepare their home for a coming tropical storm or hurricane, bringing things in from outside and mounting hurricane shutters. These services are billed on an hourly basis and must be arranged well ahead of a storm.

Whitehall also provides home monitoring as an ancillary service. Clients who sign up for home monitoring receive special post-hurricane treatment. After a storm passes, they will drive by and enter the home if necessary, do a damage assessment and call residents to let them know what if any repairs are needed.

"We will take whatever steps are necessary to secure the home," Tutton said. "And then once the power is back on we contact the owner and let them know the status of the house."

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