

filed directly with the insurance company, and need not involve the CCB.

Insuring a contraction operation isn't cheap; for example, a medium-sized operation, employing upwards of 20 people, can be required to carry \$1 million in coverage, which can cost up to \$10,000 a year; the actual amount of coverage is based on payroll. That same company also is required to carry a bond of \$10,000 to \$15,000, costing \$100 a year and paid up front in three-year increments.

A contractor applying for the first time for a CCB license needs to complete 16 hours of training (rumor has it it's now tougher than it used to be) on law and business practices and pass a state test proving aptitude; the cost of classes varies according to the provider, and the test runs \$106 and the license itself — good for two years — runs \$260.

The CCB licensing process, however, does not ensure professional aptitude regarding a particular trade. To repeat, and clarify, because this is important: If you hire a plumber with an active CCB license, there is no guarantee that plumber has ever used a toilet in his life, much less snaked one for a clog.

For someone as involved with the CCB as Prozanski, this lack of testing for professional aptitude presents something of a problem. He says that for the past couple of legislative sessions there have been discussions about implementing some basic processes to ensure competency among the trades.

Prozanski says that, among consumers, "I really think there's a duty there and expectation when people are holding themselves out to do professional work that they have some standard. We can always dicker and bicker over this among ourselves, [but] there's some

expectation there. In some cases you're talking about life and death in how something's wired or not wired."

### ONE MAN'S CRUSADE

For Brad Cook, owner of Huckleberry Fence & Deck, the outing of unlicensed contractors has become something of a crusade — one he's taken up with politicians, HBC and CCB, as well as other contractors. Cook says that what started right around 2000 as a run-of-the-mill check into his competitors' prices became an unofficial investigation into unlicensed

unlicensed businesses, when cross-referenced by a single click, turned out to have a newer, active license.)

According to Cook, his ambition simply has been to clean up the industry and create a level playing field where every contractor is working within the parameters of honesty and legality. "My philosophy has always been, I don't want to be a snitch on the whole thing," he says. "I don't want to be turning my fellow businesses in. What we're doing is just trying to educate the public so they can play it safe."

On this front, he asserts that when he loses a job to a licensed contractor, he's "ecstatic,

different take on the issue of unlicensed contractors, an attitude that can be described as fairly laissez faire. "I don't really get involved in what's getting out there," Pratt says of unlicensed contractors. "My philosophy is, I'm not worried about what everybody else is doing."

Not, he adds, that he's completely oblivious or apathetic about the issue. "I think everybody should be licensed, no doubt, in a perfect world," Pratt explains, adding that "hopefully they get found." Nonetheless, he says that a certain segment of the industry always has and always will try to cut corners, and it's up to both consumers and honest contractors to maintain high standards.

"You're probably not going to catch all of them," Pratt says of unlicensed contractors. "They're going to be here and there. You just take care of the best that you know how to do with what you have. Clean your own closet," he adds.

When it comes to fixing the current system, Cook exhibits a forgiveness that belies the apparent ardor with which he's investigated the license status of contractors in every trade. "We're not expecting changes overnight," he says, adding that he believes a kind of amnesty should be set up for currently unlicensed contractors — in other words, set a specific date for a crackdown, and anyone going legit before the deadline will be forgiven for any past transgressions.

"Let's forget it, let's move forward and get everybody on the boat here," is how Cook puts it. **EW**

*Rick Levin is an award-winning freelance writer and a recent transplant from the Seattle area where he edited and wrote for several newspapers, including The Stranger and Seattle Weekly.*

## 'IN SOME CASES, YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT LIFE & DEATH IN HOW SOMETHING'S WIRED.' — Oregon Sen. Floyd Prozanski

contractors working in the marketplace.

"What I started to see was, if I was to do a fence for the same price as some of these prices I was hearing, I couldn't figure out how they were doing it," Cook explains, adding that he looked into such things as material costs, "but still it wasn't adding up."

Finally, Cook went to the CCB web site "to check out my competitors" and found that there were (by his investigation and his numbers) "20 to 25 percent unlicensed" in just the fencing industry. "Over the years that I've watched my competitors," he continues, "it's consistently been within that range."

(In double-checking Cook's numbers, this reporter discovered that several apparently

because I know he's a legitimate person. It's preposterous to think that I'm going to get every bid that I go out on."

One of Cook's pet peeves is the policy of the *Dex* yellow pages, which has a front-of-the-book disclaimer denying any responsibility for the status of those it sells ad space to. "When you open up the phone books, you assume that these people are licensed," he says.

On the flip side are such papers as *The Register-Guard*, which has a strict policy requiring its contractors to provide a CCB number before being allowed to list their services. (Very few of the CCB numbers listed in the classified section turn up an unlicensed status.)

Al Pratt of Elite Fence Co. has a somewhat

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