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Coral Gables builder guts his own bad drywall-plagued home

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Across South Florida and the country, distraught homeowners feel stuck in their stinky, corroding homes that are breaking down bit by bit from something leaching from defective Chinese drywall.

For most, moving out, paying rent somewhere else and keeping up with their mortgages is far too expensive, so they continue living in the unsavory conditions. They are in financial limbo, waiting for money from lawsuits inching their way through state and federal courts that might yield a payout a year or two -- or more -- from now, before contemplating repairs.

Some are hoping for home builders to come to their rescue. Others are hoping for money from insurance claims.

But waiting could just make the problem worse, said Frank Mackle, a home builder who recently discovered his own house has the problem product.

So he gutted the townhome himself a few weeks ago.

"This is coming out of my own pocket," said Mackle, walking through the shell of the 2,300-square-foot Coral Gables home.

"I had it all tricked out," he said, recalling the custom wall treatments, plantation shutters and crown moldings. He estimates the repairs will cost at least \$80,000 -- money he is borrowing to fix the property.

Seeing the destruction from the bad drywall, Mackle is certain that the repairs would only be more expensive if he were to wait.

"If we let this thing fester, the amount of damage could be that much more," he said. "I'm not a scientist. I'm a victim who's trying not to go overboard."

Mackle is hoping to save some of the pipes, some wiring, kitchen cabinets, crown moldings and baseboards. Other home builders remediating homes are recycling only the homes' outermost shell, for fear that the chemicals from the drywall may have seeped into other items, possibly leading to more corrosion in the future.

As of Thursday, about 540 complaints about drywall had been registered with the Florida Department of Health. Tens of thousands of homes in Florida and as many as 100,000 across the country are believed to have been built with imported drywall that homeowners say has triggered everything from respiratory problems and corroded air conditioner coils and wiring to blackened jewelry and other metals.

LINGERING EFFECTS

Mackle has enlisted engineers, electricians, plumbers and an air-quality testing company to monitor his renovations and ensure there are no lingering effects from the drywall.

Mackle wasn't involved in the construction of the property, which he intended to live in only while building a permanent residence for his family. He, his wife and three daughters spent about 18 months in the townhome, never connecting the malfunctioning air conditioner, microwave and stove with bad drywall.

"We were experts," Mackle said. "Fast forward a few months and I'm a victim."

They had planned to rent out the property, in the Bermuda Village development on Loretto Avenue, once they left. They moved out, turned up the thermostat and returned six weeks later to an overwhelming smell of rotten eggs.

Then a neighbor mentioned similar problems with appliances. Mackle looked at the drywall and saw it was stamped with the name Knauf, as in Knauf Plasterboard Tianjin, one of the companies targeted by lawsuits for manufacturing the defective wall board. Mackle has a lawsuit against KPT too, but he isn't counting on receiving anything.

Coral Gables attorney David Durkee, who has filed lawsuits on behalf of people who suspect imported drywall is affecting their properties, cautioned homeowners against taking action's like Mackle.

DRAWBACKS

He compared the situation to a car accident victim who believes the car's design or manufacturing caused the accident.

"In this case, if the client were to perform repairs without giving the defendant an opportunity to inspect and test the car, the defendant could claim that there was destruction of the evidence and the plaintiff may lose the right to bring the action," Durkee said. "Remember -- we have to prove that the home is defective because of Chinese drywall -- not that the home contains Chinese drywall."

But Mackle said he feels he has no choice.

"This is not easy for me to do, but I don't see that I have any options. It can't be left alone," he said. "Who's going to rent the place? Who's going to buy it from me?"

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