Just for Realtors®: How to protect yourself from radon burns.

Can radon cause burns? Well, not real ones, but plenty of figurative ones: burns in the wallet, hot tempers, and commission checks turned to ash. Here are three stories from my direct experience. Since I'm just one inspector in a vast market, I assume there must be dozens of similar stories out there. You don't want to be part of my next installment! All of these are true, but no real names are used.

1. Agent Pat G. sold a home to a Mike and Andrea, who were moving from Cincinnati to Novi. The buyers told Pat they wanted a radon test along with the home inspection. Pat referred an established inspection company, one known to be reputable and radon-capable. The inspection went well, the radon test showed a fairly low level, and then the bomb dropped: Andrea asked to see the inspector's radon testing credentials. He had nothing to show her. As it turns out, he *had* been trained for radon testing years ago, but had allowed his credentials to lapse because he didn't like hassling with con-ed. Andrea was upset, particularly with Pat, because she and Mike has assumed that radon testers in Michigan had to be qualified just like the ones in Ohio. In the end, the *agent paid* for a repeat radon test out of pocket, this time by a qualified testing company.

2. This one involves a home in Orion Twp., and the facts are nearly the same. This time, a well-informed *seller* asked for credentials which the inspector didn't have, because he was never trained in radon testing at all! The inspector himself ended up paying for a retest by a qualified person. The resulting delay pushed the testing outside the contingency period, and necessitated some rather tense negotiations with the seller. The retest showed a lower radon level, too.

3. A radon test in Madison Heights showed a level of 10 pCi/l, well above the recommended action level of 4. The buyers were aware that radon is a cancer risk, but were entirely *unaware* of how easy it is to fix. They walked away from the deal. (Yes, that smell is the smoke from a toasted commission check!) The seller then called a local radon company, and asked for a confirmatory test. This test showed a level of 1 pCi/l ! Both testing companies were using the same type of highly sophisticated monitors. To settle the discrepancy, the two companies ended up running a side-by-side comparison test. Result? 1 pCi/l on both monitors! So what happened to the first test? How can there be that big a difference?

   During the second and third tests of the Madison Heights house, the owners were advised (by the second company) of the requirement for closed-house conditions. This was not mentioned by the first company before the first test. During that first test, the owners had operated a large whole-house fan for many hours. Such a fan produces a strong de-pressurization in the house, which tends to suck in more soil gas and *increase* radon levels in the basement. Not a result one would expect, but we in the industry know how important closed-house conditions are if a test is going to be trustworthy. But since the first inspector didn't have real radon training, he didn't know this, and didn't advise the occupants of closed-house conditions. Result? An inaccurate test, and a blown deal.

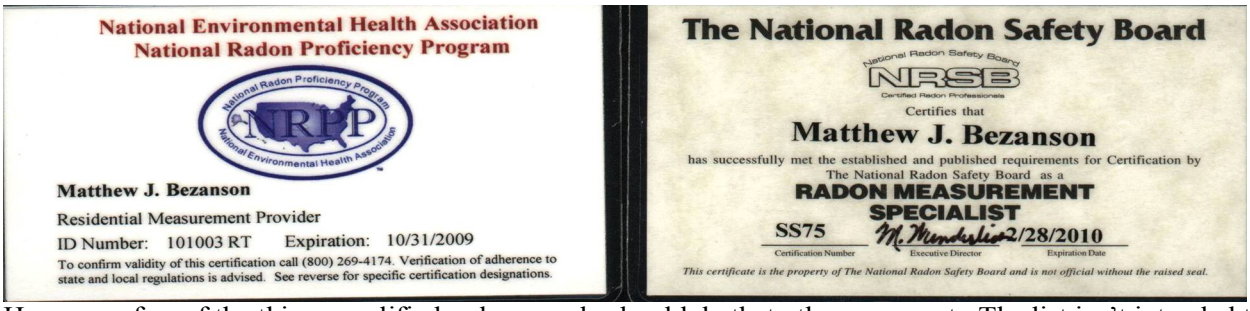
So how can you protect your clients and yourselves from specious radon tests? You can no longer count on the EPA, because their model program for training and certifying testers, mitigators and labs ended in 1997. The states were supposed to pick up the EPA's voluntary standards and turn them into laws, but Michigan was one of a few states that just ignored the whole issue. As a result, *anybody* can call themselves a radon tester in Michigan. When qualifications are voluntary, the market is supposed to weed out the unqualified people. Who is the market? You, of course! You, the real estate professional, are in a better position than John Q. Public to know who's qualified. After all, you're reading this!

Two industry organizations provide testing and qualifications for radon testers and mitigators. The National Environmental Health Association (http://www.radongas.org/) which had been credentialing several different kinds of health professionals for years, now has a Radon Proficiency Program. The National Radon Safety Board (www.nrsb.org) created a similar program, based on the voluntary standards of AARST. There are efforts

underway to create a single program from these two groups, but for now, credentials from either can be considered sufficient.

So how do you spot a real radon technician?

- You can visit those Websites above and look an up individual by name, or scan by zip code.
- Both NEHA and NRSB issue ID cards, and you can ask to see those. Look carefully, especially at the expiration date! The cards look like this:



Here are a few of the things qualified radon people should do that others may not. The list isn't intended to teach anyone how to do radon testing; it's just to help you spot incompetent testing.

- There should be at least a sincere effort to get a signed statement of compliance with Closed-House Conditions from the occupants. If the house is vacant, notifications should be left in a conspicuous place in the house, and the listing agent should be informed of what is going on.
- Closed-house conditions should start 12 hours *before* the test begins, and remain in place for the entire two-day test period.
- Closed house conditions mean *all* windows on *all* levels kept closed. Not just the basement, not just the first floor. Exhaust fans off. (See story #3)
- Steps need to be taken to stop test tampering. Some really sophisticated active monitors have sensors to let the tester know if conditions change during the test. (Open windows, instrument movement, etc.) Testers using passive devices like charcoal canisters or bags need much more elaborate tamper protection, like sealing all the windows with tamper-evident tape for starters. The elaborate electronic monitor makes compliance easier!
- The test device must be at least 20 inches above the floor. Tests on top of sumps are useless.
- In real estate transactions, all passive devices must be used in pairs. Two identical devices, placed side-by-side, results averaged. (Not needed for electronic monitors.)
- Electronic monitors require annual calibration. Ask to see the tag or certificate for that particular instrument.

Here's a question: Since training is expensive (never local), good equipment is expensive, ($2,500-4,000 for the best monitors), keeping it calibrated is expensive, con-ed is expensive (also never local), errors-and-omissions insurance for radon is expensive, then how likely is it that a properly qualified radon tester is going to be the low bidder? Put another way, should you or your clients be choosing a radon tester based on who's cheapest? Similarly, should you or they be making decisions based on test results from an unqualified tester?

Of course, when a radon problem is found, it's important to know that this is the *most fixable* of environmental problems. If the buyer doesn't know this, the stage is set for more problems. But that's an article for another day!

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