

What to fix before you sell. And what to leave alone.

Twenty-five years of building homes, condensed into the list I walk through before a client spends a dollar getting ready for market. Print it, work through it, ignore the parts that don't apply to your house.

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VERSION

August 2026

One rule, before any of it

Most sellers renovate to make the house better. That is the wrong goal. You are renovating to **remove reasons to offer less** — which is a much shorter, much cheaper list.

A buyer standing in your kitchen is not adding up what you spent. They are quietly building a repair list, and every item on it becomes a discount in their head — usually two or three times what the fix actually costs. Your job before market is to shorten that list, not to hand the next owner a kitchen they would have chosen differently anyway.

Which produces the order of operations everything below follows:

1. **Anything that reads as a defect** — water, movement, smell, obvious wear.
2. **Anything mechanical near the end of its life** that a buyer's inspector will name in writing.
3. **Light, paint, and the first ninety seconds** — cheap, high-leverage presentation.
4. **Only then, and only sometimes, a real renovation.**

The mistake I see most often

A seller spends \$45,000 on a kitchen eight weeks before listing, and the house sells for roughly what it would have anyway — because the buyer who paid the top price was going to change the finishes regardless, and the buyer who wanted the kitchen exactly as built didn't exist. Meanwhile the damp corner in the basement, which would have cost a fraction to properly diagnose and address, is now the only thing in the inspection report.

The small money that moves the needle

These are the items where the cost is small, the effect on how the house reads is large, and a buyer notices within seconds. If you do nothing else on this sheet, do these. Costs are typical ranges for the west GTA in 2026 and will vary with your house, your trades and the season.

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| ☐ | Every bulb in the house matched and working
Same colour temperature throughout — mixed warm and cool bulbs make a home look neglected and photograph badly. Go brighter than feels normal. | \$60–200 |
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| ☐ | Silicone re-run at every tub, shower and counter
Cracked, stained or mouldy caulking is the single fastest way a buyer concludes there is water damage they cannot see. Cut it out, don't skin over it. | \$150–400 |
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| ☐ | All doors closing and latching properly
Sticking and out-of-square doors read as "the house has moved." Usually it's hinges and strike plates, not foundation — but the buyer doesn't know that. | \$0–300 |
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| ☐ | Every visible leak or drip fixed and the stain repainted
Fix the cause first. A fresh coat over an old stain is worse than the stain — inspectors are trained to spot exactly that. | \$100–600 |
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| ☐ | Furnace and A/C serviced, filter new, receipt kept
A dated service receipt on the counter does more for buyer confidence than almost anything else you can put there. | \$150–350 |
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| ☐ | Grading and downspouts pushing water away from the house
Extensions onto splash blocks, soil sloped away. Ten minutes of work that pre-empts the most expensive question a buyer can ask. | \$50–300 |
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| ☐ | Gutters cleared, roof visibly free of debris and moss
Buyers estimate roof age from the street. Clean it before the photographer arrives. | \$150–400 |
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| ☐ | Front door, hardware and house numbers refreshed | \$150–600 |
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Paint the door, replace the handleset if it's tired, add a clean mat. This is the frame around every photo and the thirty seconds a buyer stands still waiting to get in.

☐	Switch plates, outlets and vent covers replaced	\$60–250
	Painted-over, yellowed or cracked plates are everywhere in the photos and cost almost nothing to change.	

☐	Smoke and CO alarms current and correctly located	\$60–200
	Required, checked at closing in Ontario, and trivially cheap. Do not leave this to the last week.	

☐	Deep clean, including windows inside and out	\$300–800
	The highest-return dollar in this entire document. Nothing else you can buy for a few hundred dollars changes a showing as much.	

☐	Declutter to roughly two-thirds of your current contents	\$0–500
	Storage space is what buyers are measuring when they open your closets. Free, and it makes every room read larger.	

The middle money — spend it selectively

Each of these is worth doing *if* the condition beside it is true for your house. If it isn't, put the money back in your pocket.

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| ☐ | Neutral repaint of main living areas
Do it if your walls are bold, dated, patchy, or it's been more than six or seven years. Whole-house repaints are rarely necessary — main floor, hallways and the primary bedroom carry most of the effect. | \$2,000–6,000 |
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| ☐ | Refinish rather than replace hardwood
Do it if the boards are sound but worn. Refinishing typically costs a fraction of replacement and photographs identically. Replace only where boards are cupped, water-damaged or missing. | \$3–6 / sq ft |
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| ☐ | Carpet replaced in bedrooms only
Do it if it's stained or older than about ten years. Mid-grade is correct here — nobody pays a premium for expensive carpet, but visible wear costs you. | \$1,500–4,000 |
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| ☐ | Kitchen cabinet refacing or spray-finishing
Do it if the boxes and layout are sound and only the doors look dated. This is the alternative to a full kitchen and it is usually the right one. | \$3,000–9,000 |
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| ☐ | Counters replaced, cabinets kept
Do it if the counter is laminate or damaged and the cabinets are otherwise fine. Pair with a new sink and tap; skip the backsplash tile unless it's damaged. | \$2,500–7,000 |
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| ☐ | Bathroom refresh — vanity, mirror, lighting, tap, toilet
Do it if the fixtures are dated but the tile and tub are sound. A full bathroom gut is Tier three and rarely returns its cost pre-sale. | \$1,500–5,000 |
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| ☐ | Dated light fixtures swapped
Do it in the entry, over the dining table and in the kitchen. Those three carry the room in listing photos. Leave the rest. | \$400–1,500 |
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| ☐ | Garage door replaced | \$1,800–4,500 |
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Do it if yours is dented, faded or noisy. On a house where the garage faces the street it occupies a large share of the front elevation.



Landscaping tidy – edges, mulch, trimmed shrubs, sod patches

\$500–2,500

Do it always if you have a front yard. Overgrown planting makes a house look smaller and older from the curb.



Professional staging, or at minimum a staging consultation

\$500–4,000

Do it if the house is vacant, or if your furniture is oversized for the rooms. A two-hour consultation is inexpensive and often the only staging you need.

Don't renovate that

Big projects, and whether they make sense in the months before a sale. These are general patterns from what I've built and what I've watched sell — your house, your street and your timing can change the answer, which is exactly what a walkthrough is for.

RARELY

Full kitchen gut, purely to sell

Rarely returns its cost inside a pre-sale window, and you are choosing finishes for a stranger. Reface, replace the counter, upgrade the lighting. The exception: a kitchen so unusable it excludes ordinary buyers outright.

RARELY

Gutting a functional bathroom

Same logic. Refresh the fixtures. Gut only if there is water damage behind the tile — and then you are repairing, not renovating.

RARELY

Additions, dormers, garage conversions

Long timelines, permit exposure, and the cost almost never comes back on a near-term sale. Build these for yourself, years before you list, or not at all.

RARELY

Pools, hot tubs, elaborate hardscaping

These split the buyer pool rather than deepen it. For a portion of buyers a pool is a liability, not a feature.

RARELY

High-end appliances installed to sell

Buyers notice appliances exist; they do not usually pay a premium for the badge. Mid-range and working beats prestigious and mismatched.

DEPENDS

Finishing a basement

Worth it where the ceiling height, egress and moisture control genuinely support it. Not worth it as a cosmetic cover — a finished basement over an unresolved moisture problem is a defect with drywall on it, and inspectors find it.

DEPENDS

Windows

Replace where units are failed, fogged or won't operate. A full-house replacement of serviceable windows rarely returns its cost, though it does help a house that shows cold and dated.

DEPENDS

Roof

If it is at or past end of life, either replace it or price the house acknowledging it — those are the two honest options. A visibly failing roof invites a discount far larger than the roof.

YES

Anything actively wet, moving or unsafe

Always. Water intrusion, active settlement, unsafe wiring, a failing main stack. These are not renovations, they are the price of selling a house without a five-figure conversation on offer night.

YES

Closing open permits and getting paperwork in order

Always. Old open permits and undocumented work surface during a buyer's due diligence at the worst possible moment. Check with your municipality early — this takes time you won't have later.

The knock-on-the-wall test

Before you fund anything above \$5,000, ask one question: *does this remove a reason for a buyer to offer less, or does it just make the house nicer for me?* Both are legitimate ways to spend money on your own home. Only the first is an investment in the sale.

The first ninety seconds

A buyer forms their opinion of a house before they reach the kitchen, and spends the rest of the showing confirming it. What they take in, in order:

SECONDS	WHAT THEY REGISTER	WHAT YOU CONTROL
0–15	The approach — curb, walkway, front door, is it cared for	Edges cut, door painted, nothing stored in view, lights on
15–30	The smell, and the light level in the entry	No cooking, no pets, no air freshener masking anything. Every light on, every blind open, day or night
30–60	Ceilings, floors, sightlines — does anything look wrong	No stains, no cracked plaster, no mismatched flooring transitions, nothing on the floor that shouldn't be
60–90	Storage, and whether the house feels big enough	Closets at two-thirds. Counters clear. Furniture reduced so walking paths are wide

On air fresheners. Never. An experienced buyer's agent reads a strongly scented house as a house that is hiding something, and starts looking for it. Clean, ventilate, and leave it neutral.

The nine things that cost sellers the most

Walk your own house looking for these. Finding them now means you decide how they get handled. Finding them on offer night means the buyer does.

☐ **Any efflorescence or staining on basement walls**

The white chalky bloom means water is moving through the foundation. It may be historic and resolved, or it may be active — the difference matters and is worth establishing before you list.

☐ **Diagonal cracks at the corners of windows and doors**

Vertical hairlines in concrete are usually shrinkage. Diagonal cracks radiating from openings suggest movement and should be looked at by someone qualified.

☐ **Sloping or bouncing floors**

Often a beam, post or joist issue that is straightforward to address once identified — and expensive to negotiate once a buyer's inspector names it.

☐ **Knob-and-tube or aluminum wiring, or a fuse panel**

Insurance and financing consequences for the buyer, which means it becomes a price conversation. Know your status before you list.

☐ **Galvanized or lead supply piping**

Common in older Hamilton and Oakville housing stock. Check what enters the house and what runs through it.

☐ **Water heater, furnace or A/C past typical service life**

Get the ages, write them down, and be ready to answer. An honest, documented answer costs far less than a discovered one.

☐ **Bathroom or kitchen fans venting into the attic**

More common than people expect, and it produces attic moisture and mould over time. Cheap to correct, ugly in a report.

☐ **Missing or inadequate attic insulation**

Visible from the hatch, easy to improve, and frequently noted in inspections.



Work that was done without permits

Basement apartments, decks, structural openings, electrical. Establish the paperwork position early — it is a legal and disclosure question, not a cosmetic one.

How to read this section

These are the observations of someone who spent 25 years building and repairing houses, and they are meant to tell you **where to look and what to ask about**. They complement — and do not replace — a licensed home inspector, engineer or contractor. Where something on this list is present in your house, get it properly assessed.

Working back from your list date

The most common reason a pre-sale plan fails is not budget — it is starting eight weeks of work three weeks out, and listing into a half-finished house.

12+ weeks

- Walkthrough and decide what is actually getting done — Tier one, then whatever Tier two applies
 - Establish the paperwork position: permits, past work, mechanical ages
 - Assess anything on the red-flag list with the right professional
 - Book trades. Good ones in Halton are booked out further than you think
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8 weeks

- Structural, water and mechanical work first — everything that opens walls
 - Start decluttering. One room a weekend, into storage, not into the garage
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4 weeks

- Paint, floors, fixtures, cabinet work — in that order
 - Landscaping and exterior tidy while the weather allows
 - Staging consultation, so you know what furniture leaves
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2 weeks

- Deep clean, windows, carpets
 - Final touch-ups, bulbs matched, silicone fresh, every door latching
 - Photography and floor plans — never before the house is finished
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Week of

- Receipts, warranties and service records gathered in one folder for buyers
 - Final clean, all lights on, everything off the counters
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NEXT STEP · NO COST, NO OBLIGATION

Free Renovation & Upgrade Estimate

This sheet is general. Your house isn't. I'll walk through it with you and give you a contractor-grade read on what's worth doing, what it should cost, and what to leave alone — the same assessment I'd do for myself, before you've committed to selling or to me.

Bring the checklist. Anything you ticked, we'll go through together.

Book a walkthrough — 416-953-9545

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