Montgomery County Office of Consumer Protection Warns Homeowners of Rise in Driveway-Paving Scams

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As the warm weather approaches, the Montgomery County Office of Consumer Protection (OCP) is warning homeowners about driveway-paving scammers who typically look to exploit them in spring. These scammers are a common problem not only in Montgomery County, but also across Maryland. Homeowners should be aware and take appropriate measures to avoid falling victim to it.

In the last year, OCP has been taking measures against individuals who performed unlicensed home improvement work, particularly those who conducted driveway paving. As a result, civil and criminal charges have been issued against them, and several have been issued arrest warrants. OCP also has managed to suspend all websites associated with these criminals, either permanently or temporarily, through their actions.

"As a community, we must remain vigilant and take appropriate measures to prevent ourselves from being deceived by fraudulent activities," said County Executive Marc Elrich. "It is essential for residents to be aware that the Office of Consumer Protection is an excellent resource available to them whenever they suspect they are being scammed, particularly in cases related to driveway paving.”

The scam often starts with a knock on the door and with someone offering to repave or seal a driveway or do some other type of concrete work. It is usually presented with a sense of urgency, as the scammer explains there is some type of deal for cash on the spot or claims to have leftover material from a nearby project.

 “These scams involve driveway pavers who aren’t properly licensed as home improvement contractors as required under Montgomery County or Maryland law, or who might be soliciting against County policies,” said Lee Glass, an investigator with OCP, “They knock on people's doors and defraud them out of money, fail to complete work, perform exceedingly sub-standard work or take their deposits and run. People have relied on the fact that others in their neighborhood have worked with a company, but that is not a fool-proof method of protecting yourself, your property or your assets.”

The quality of work of unlicensed scammers is often unsatisfactory, and their final cost generally is much more than the quoted price. Some scammers may ask for a deposit, bring equipment to the property or even start the job, only to abandon it midway and leave with the property damaged. There is often no warranty or responsible party to make repairs or to honor the “warranty” that was sold with the project. These scams can result in civil or criminal violations and, in the worst-case scenarios, fraud, theft, property destruction or elder abuse.

A resident of Silver Spring recently reported being a victim of a driveway scam. She mentioned that several people in her neighborhood had been working with a certain "company," which made her feel more comfortable working with it as well. However, she ended up with a poor-quality product and felt that she had been scammed.

OCP also has been working with a victim from Gaithersburg. “I was lied to about what they were going to be doing, and I have had three other reputable licensed concrete businesses say it was the worst job they have ever seen, and the whole job has to be ripped out,” she said. “They also damaged my property by not fixing a window which was broken and washed cement down the storm drain, damaging the environment."

To avoid becoming a victim, OCP advises to look for the following red flags that may indicate you were approached by a scammer rather than a trustworthy professional contractor:

* The offer is unsolicited. Most scams begin when an individual appearing as a contractor goes out of their way to offer an estimate that was never requested.
* There is no written contract up front. The absence of a written and signed contract before any work is done is a dead giveaway that a homeowner is about to be the target of a scam or about to get a job of very poor quality. Contracts are in place for the protection of the business and the customer.
* They do not have a Maryland Home Improvement Commission (MHIC) license number. In the case that a contract is presented, homeowners must check for a MHIC number to ensure the proposal has been presented by someone licensed to do the work. If the homeowner is unsure, they should contact OCP or the MHIC before approving the work to be done.
* They push you to make a quick decision. Trusted contractors provide written estimates that remain valid for a specific period of time. Be cautious of contractors who insist on on-the-spot hiring.
* The offer presented is cash-only. Most reputable contractors accept checks or credit cards and do not require cash-only terms.
* The individual is from out of state or has an unmarked truck. Roaming scammers often drive unmarked trucks or have out-of-state license plates.

For more consumer tips or to file a complaint with the Office of Consumer Protection, visit <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/OCP> or call 240-777-0311.

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