



Home renovation scams building

By **GEOFF MATTHEWS**, Money Editor

Consumers can be a funny lot.

We'll clip coupons and drive from store to store to save a few pennies on a box of tissues or a buck off a pound of steak. But when it comes to choosing someone to do a \$100,000 renovation project on our home, all too often we'll take the first offer to come our way.

No one understands this better than a small, but busy group of scam artists who build nothing more than elaborate sales pitches in return for your money.

Two provincial cabinet ministers yesterday visited a home renovation project under way in Westboro to emphasize the need for consumers to be cautious when they're making sizable expenditures on their homes.

By far the majority of contractors are honest business people doing quality work, Consumers Services Minister Tim Hudak told a news conference at the Highland Ave. site.

Unfortunately, fly-by-night operators are giving the industry a bad name, he said.

Hudak said his department received 2,000 inquiries last year about home renovation scams, and said the province is determined to crack down on the shady operators who are costing consumers millions of dollars a year.

New provincial legislation provides protections for buyers, he said, including a 10-day cooling off period to allow them to back out of contracts, a 10% estimate regulation which requires that costs don't vary by more than that amount from the original quote and a 30-day delivery rule, which stipulates all work must be completed within 30 days of the date promised.

'GOOD SALESMEN'

That will be a help, said local contractor Rex Engel, vice-chairman of the Ontario Home Builders' Association renovators' council, who recently took over a home "where we had to redo 60% of the work."

While the scammers may not be particularly good contractors, Engel said, "they are incredibly good salesmen."

Hudak recommended consumers get at least three quotes before proceeding with a major project, ask for referrals from friends and relatives, request a written estimate and pay no more than 25% of a project cost as a down payment.