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DECK COATINGS AND THEIR CARE

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DECK COATINGS AND THEIR CARE

By Bill Leys

Waterproof deck coatings and community associations seem to go hand in hand on the coast of California. It seems that every association has them, either over a living space or attached off a room. While owners love them because they often use their decks as another room of the unit, boards of directors and association managers usually detest them because of the problems that seem to always come along with them.

Some boards seek to minimize their association's exposure to problems by seeking to change the CC&Rs to make owners responsible for these exclusive use areas. Other boards just put their heads in the sand, repairing decks as complaints come in, usually with the bare minimum of work to stop the deck from leaking. Smart managers and boards will tackle the problem head-on, looking to get their deck problems under control right away. As a former association manager, I saw first hand how very expensive ignoring maintenance on waterproof decks could be.

The cost of a new waterproof coating isn't cheap, but the cost of repairing dry-rotted framing supporting the deck is a lot worse. A contract an association in Pismo Beach let for resurfacing eight decks turned from \$8,000+ into more than \$100,000 in dry rot repairs when it was all over. That association had deferred the maintenance required by the manufacturer for several years beyond the recommended maintenance schedule, allowing the deck surfaces to degrade to the point that water was able to penetrate into the framing and rot it from the inside out.

INSPECTIONS

The key to preventing decks from becoming a problem is inspecting the decks. Often the manager and or the board will walk the association's common area property for inspection of the components for which the association is responsible. Typical items that are checked are downspouts and gutters; the condition of the paint on the buildings; the roofs and whatever else can be readily viewed from the street and sidewalks. But because waterproof decks are typically on a second or third floor, they usually are never inspected. Access through the home is difficult to arrange with owners and what manager or board member really wants to climb a ladder?

Therefore, the decks just linger by themselves, never really thought of until an owner calls to say that water dripped into their home from the deck above during the biggest rainstorm of the season. Then the deck problem raises its ugly head, requiring the manager to go into crisis management mode, calling a handyman out to cover the deck temporarily, waiting for a deck company to come out to inspect the deck, and getting the board to approve the repair, all of which can take a month or more. The owner is frustrated because his or her deck leaks, the manager is frustrated because he or she hears from the owner 2-3 times with complaints, the deck company is usually busy with lots of leak calls and thus it takes forever to get anything done to cure the problem.

Frequent (at least once per year) inspections will help eliminate problems. Catching small problems

before they become big problems can save considerable sums of money from having to be spent on framing repairs due to leaks. Summer is an ideal time to inspect decks; it isn't raining and there is some time to make repairs, if needed, before the winter storms begin. The inspection needn't be a difficult thing to do; there are many things to look for that a layman can spot pretty easily. If the association or management firm has a deck company that they trust, perhaps hiring it as an outside source to perform the inspections would also work well. Digital cameras can be used to provide photo documentation of the conditions found, allowing the manager and board to get an exact idea of the problems that they may be facing.

When doing your own inspections, it is helpful to know what type of deck coating is on the decks. A brand name helps, but more importantly, knowing what type of material has been applied is better. Elastomeric, urethane, lightweight concrete and floating systems are typical coating types in use on many decks. By knowing what type deck coating you have, you can understand how often the deck will need to be maintained.

Warning signs to look for on your deck inspection include cracks in the deck coating, nails popping through the coating from the subsurface, delaminating paint and bubbles in the coating surface. Any of these items is a sign that the waterproof surface has been compromised. Owners should be looking for these warning signs too, as well as looking for stains on their ceiling or walls in the home below their deck. Metal flashing can be checked for signs of rust, pulling loose from the deck coating or if it is bent or broken.

If you find these problems on a deck, a simple check of the condition of the substrate underneath can be achieved by using your foot to check for softness. Be careful, it may be so soft that your foot could go through the deck in a worst-case scenario! Soft substrate is indicative of what could be a bigger problem underneath, dry-rotted framing and/or termites. The other hot button in today's world is mold and mildew. This may exist underneath also.

Another thing to look for when performing inspections is checking to see what's on the deck—plants, tables, umbrellas, grills, carpet, etc. Table legs, grills, sharp objects and high heels can damage soft deck coatings. Plants in direct contact with the surface need to be raised up to allow air to circulate and dry the water used to moisten the plants.

An uninformed owner, usually to hide an ugly degrading deck surface, frequently covers it with indoor/outdoor carpet. This is the worst thing an owner can do to a deck because it locks in any moisture trapped underneath.

Hot coals from charcoal grills can drop onto the deck surface, burning through the waterproof layers of soft deck coatings. Grease from gas and charcoal grills will also stain the deck, if it is not cleaned off soon after the spill.

Frequent (at least once per year) inspections will help eliminate problems. Catching small problems before they become big problems can save considerable sums of money.

MAINTENANCE

Maintenance is the key to a long-lasting deck. We have seen decks, designed to last 25–30 years with proper care, that are ruined beyond repair within 5 to 10 years after being installed because of ignoring or delaying the maintenance the deck needs.

Just like a car, deck coatings need to be washed occasionally. A good cleaning will rinse dirt away that can wear down the coating. Just like the buildings, the deck needs to be painted or resealed on the schedule recommended by the manufacturer. All waterproof coating sealant needs to be renewed, sometimes as often as every two–three years. The top coat is a specialized paint/sealer, formulated to protect and seal the underlayer, which is where the waterproofing material is. The top coat is usually applied at the rate of about 8–10 mils thick, by brush, roller or spray. UV (sun), rain and foot traffic will

wear this protective layer away at a rate of mils per year. Even though the deck may look pretty good and the paint's color may be there, by year 3 little protection is afforded the under layer. Continued deferred maintenance is the beginning of the end of a deck's usable life, often resulting in expensive repairs.

As a general rule, soft deck coatings (urethanes, elastomerics and floating systems) will need more frequent maintenance than hard concrete based deck coatings. They also have a greater chance of failing prematurely if they are not maintained as recommended. Concrete-based systems are usually more forgiving if not maintained according to the manufacturer's schedule. Consult with the manufacturer or deck coating installer if you are not sure what you have.

SELECTING A NEW DECK COATING SYSTEM

To assist boards and their managers in getting the best deal for their money, here are some ideas to put into use when looking for new coatings to renew the old coatings of your associations.

As always, you'll want to get at least three vendors to bid your job. Arrange a site visit where all bidders can come at the same time and review the job; they can ask questions that all of them can get the same answers to. Having their respective manufacturers or representative review the job will be a good idea too. The sales representative should provide the specifications for the contractor to bid on.

Ask each contractor bidding your job what deck system they are proposing to install. Tufflex®, Mer-Kote®, Pacific Polymer®, Dex-O-Tex®, Desert Brand Life Deck® are common brand names. Watch out for deck coatings that are proprietary systems, manufactured by a small, hide chemical company. Some deck coating companies "cook up" their own deck coating to minimize their costs on materials. While some companies that do this may use a coating system that works pretty well, you won't be any manufacturer's support if problems arise before, during or after installation.

Ask your installer to provide you with the manufacturer's information, including their name, address and telephone number. Don't be afraid to call the manufacturer and speak with that firm's sales representative.

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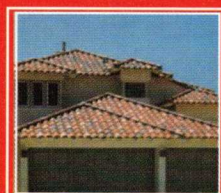


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Ask them to make a site visit, write the specifications for the work necessary, then review the work during and after the installation and provide you with a written warranty.

When selecting your deck system, there are a lot of choices available. Since it is usually difficult to get an "apples to apples" bid with 2 or 3 contractors all bidding the same system; the problem is compounded when you are comparing different coating systems. Each system may offer advantages and disadvantages over the other. What works great on concrete decks may not work so well over a plywood/OSB* substrate deck.

Urethanes, elastomerics, floating systems and lightweight acrylic systems are commonly heard terms in describing deck-coating systems. Understanding what you are

buying is critical to your project's success. Many coating products can have long drying times between steps, often resulting in keeping the decks closed for a long period of time. Does your association have residents who would be adversely affected by being locked in or out of their home, sometimes for days while a new system is being installed? Some products can have odors associated with the curing and application process that may be highly offensive or toxic. Do you have residents that might suffer from these smells? Ask your contractor about access to the house, especially if the decks they will be working on are entryways into units. Urethane deck coatings especially are notorious for strong odors associated with the curing process. It's better to find out ahead of time that a product may be smelly so that you can provide notice to residents.

A question you want answered from each bidder is whether your maintenance staff can provide future maintenance to the deck or if the deck installer must provide those services. Some manufacturer's warranties might require that only an authorized installer renew the topcoat. Others may not have that requirement. Is your association set

up with onsite maintenance personnel or outside source that could reapply sealer the association?

You should also ask the contractor would/could happen to their coating if the association doesn't maintain it according to schedule. The painted topcoat is usually 1/8" thick with two coats applied. Top coat for all deck coatings will wear down from traffic, sun, rain, etc. On some systems, when this happens, it exposes the tender underlayment (where the waterproofing materials are usually) to rapid degradation.

OTHER ITEMS TO CONSIDER

While deck coatings are one thing to consider, there are other items to consider that can cost quite a bit of money too—flashing, for instance. Generally there are two types of flashing to be found on a deck—metal flashings that look just like an "L" and drip edge flashings. Each plays a key role in waterproofing your decks.

L metal flashing is found at the wall/deck junction. It is sometimes hard to spot

* Some manufacturers will not warranty their product over OSB, which is not recognized as suitable substrate by the International Conference of Building Officials (ICBO). Be sure to ask your bidders whether this is the case with their product. Others may grant a special exemption if conditions warrant.

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Deck Coatings

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it may have been painted over. It keeps out at this very critical area. Drip edge flashing is the second type of flashing usually found on decks. It is found at the outer edge of the deck. A small bend on the bottom will kick water away from the deck as it rains off.

You need to know if your flashing is compatible with any new coatings you are considering. It may not be because it is old, improperly installed or simply does not meet the manufacturer's specifications to apply waterproof coatings to. Removal of metal flashing can often be expensive, and removal of stucco or wood siding to access it. Repairs by other trades may be required to your siding. Drip edge flashing is usually not as expensive to remove and replace because it is usually pretty accessible. However, working around railings and stairs can push the cost up if access is difficult.

Are costs of replacement included in your bid? Beware of bids that don't include these items or assure you that the flashing will meet specifications for the coating you are applying. Beware the contractor who, after entering into an agreement with you, then tells you that they "need a change order" as your flashings don't meet specifications. This is a typical "gotcha" where they add high profits onto the bid when you are having to make emergency decisions. Always ask the manufacturer's representative to address this in their scope of work.

Door thresholds, entry door and door clearances are another item to think about. You may need to budget for sliding doors down or raising threshold height when applying a new coating over an old coating.

Replacement or repair of substructure under the deck coatings is another item that can quickly add up, often exceeding the cost of the coating work itself. A thorough inspection can usually find any soft spots under the coating that indicate weak rotted plywood or OSB board. A good estimate will include allowances for replacement of plywood, anticipating most surprises. What no one can predict without destructive testing is to what extent does the damage go? Soft plywood is one thing; rotted framing supporting the deck is entirely another. Remember

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smo Beach condominiums described earlier in this article? An \$8,000 contract turned into \$100,000+ in repairs to framing and almost 8 months of time before the owners could use their decks again. Damaged framing must be repaired before putting a new coating on—there's no sense in throwing money away as the new coating will only fail as the deck supports fail too.

RESERVE FUND CONSIDERATIONS

Before you decide on a deck coating, you will want to find out what all your costs of ownership really will be. There is today's cost of purchasing the product, and there is the tomorrow's cost of future maintenance to think about as well. Selecting a high maintenance deck coating can impact your association's dues and reserve needs for years to come. For example, if a coating required a clean and reseal every 2–3 years to maintain your warranty, how much would that cost each time and multiply that over the expected life span. A low price on installation could easily turn into a high cost maintenance nightmare for the next 30 years.

Ask the contractors bidding on your work to provide you with a "at today's costs, how much would it cost to clean and reseal your coating, based on the square footage we have at our complex?" Compare each coating's costs to clean and reseal it and multiply that factor out over its expected life. The deck system you select should have a 25–30+ year life expectancy, just like most roof systems. Compare the difference and decide for yourself where you want that money to go—

into your reserves for some other component's reserve needs or to your contractor. Your reserve study preparer can be a valuable source of information too and should adjust your association's reserve study when you put a new system down or reseal your existing system.

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS WHEN CHOOSING A CONTRACTOR

When it comes to selecting a contractor to install the deck system you've chosen, it is critical that you make the right choice. Often a board will select what appears to be the least expensive contractor. That could backfire on your association if that contractor is not properly licensed, insured and bonded and an accident occurred while the contractor's staff is on the job site at your association.

Ask your contractor to provide you with this information and check it! Call their Insurance Company as listed on the form they have provided. Look up on the web site of the California Contractors State Licensing Board at www.cslb.ca.gov for their license status and class, bonding and workers compensation information. Ask the contractor to name the association and its management firm as an additional insured on their liability insurance. While you can't be named as an additional insured on workers compensation, you can be named as a party in interest and be informed if any changes occur to their workers comp policy.

Whatever you do, don't let any contractor onto association property to begin work until you have all their information in place.

References. Your contractor should be willing to provide references for work similar to yours that they have completed recently. You should also ask if you could visit the jobs that are on the reference list. Talk to the manager, the residents or the general contractor who ran the job about the firm you are considering using.

You should also ask to look at jobs that are several or more years old. This will let you see how well the coatings they applied have held up. Ask the manufacturer's sales representative about the firm you are considering and what their experience has been with that contractor.

SUMMARY

Once managers or board members know what to look for, they needn't fear the worst when it comes to association decks. Proactive is the key word—performing the necessary maintenance before the deck becomes a problem. Just like the remainder of an association's maintenance needs, incorporating the decks into a regular maintenance schedule will save heartache, time and money. EJ

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