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Calling for tighter regulations of builders

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A recent editorial in The Valley Breeze pointed out the distress some Cumberland home buyers have been suffering since their builder started having financial problems. In the May 20th edition of the newspaper, publisher Tom Ward called for tighter regulation of builders so this scenario doesn't take place again. He also said, "This issue might not be top of mind for legislators and the state's professional home builders' association, but it should be."

I have assured Ward that, on the contrary, increasing contractor professionalism and fighting abuse is front and center for the Rhode Island Builders Association (RIBA).

The builder involved is not a RIBA member, but any negative experience by any customer reflects badly on the entire residential construction industry. RIBA constantly and actively works for stronger requirements for builders to do business in this state, tough penalties for abusers, and sound laws governing development.

RIBA is working closely with other trade associations and the Rhode Island Contractors' Registration and Licensing Board (CRLB) to develop an entire curriculum of mandated, continuing-education courses for contractors, to be unveiled later this year. These will include classes in sound business practices, building and fire codes, and contract law. Courses like this will also be necessary to prepare residential contractors for eventual licensing in Rhode Island.

RIBA also works with lawmakers during every legislative session, and with the CRLB, for tougher enforcement to get unregistered, uninsured and incompetent contractors off the streets.

If it comes down to subdivision issues, the bonds established by a city or town should be sufficient to cover the cost of an incompleteness, helping the home buyers recoup. Most reputable contractors don't require large, up-front payments unless some large custom order is involved. The payment schedule reflects work that has already been completed, and home buyers should pay as they go.

CRLB has rules in place to prevent many abuses. The problem is that many CRLB decisions are severely watered down if they are appealed in court. We are working on this problem.

As it is, the vast majority of residential contractors should not be branded by the actions of a few. Anyone who hires a contractor has a responsibility to do their homework to be sure that the contractor is legitimate and does business responsibly. There are ample resources on the Internet to help any consumer do this, including the CRLB, RIBA and Better Business Bureau websites. And people should never hire a contractor without several references.

Beyond this, let's encourage people to remember that the vast majority of contractors are good, honest professionals and their neighbors, serving our communities with good, safe, healthy and energy-efficient housing choices.

Felix Carlone is the president of the Rhode Island Builders Assn.