

Timber Home Living

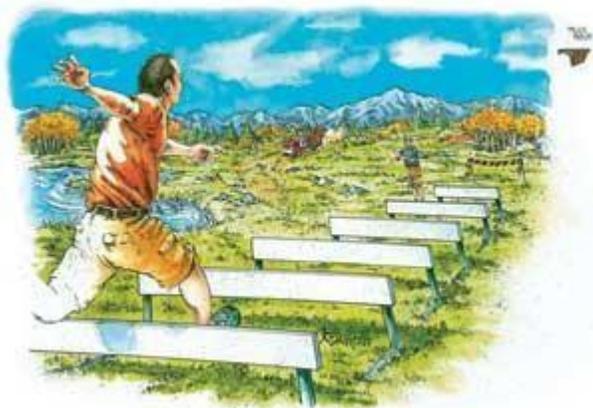
Home Stretch by Mike McCarthy,

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Home Stretch

Your home will be built this spring — now what do you need to discuss with your general contractor or builder before the sawdust flies?

Some might call it a lull. Others (the smart ones) will describe the time between finalizing construction plans and breaking ground as the period of rattle and hum. In short, things need to happen — quickly. Permits need to be obtained, materials need to be purchased, and subcontractors need to be hired. How much of this do you need to do yourself? All of it or nothing at all. It depends largely on the relationship you've established with your builder or general contractor.



We asked Missouri-based building consultant Jim Cooper to answer some important questions about prep time. After more than three decades of constructing custom homes, he's quick to emphasize how valuable the time leading up to groundbreaking can be.

Q: When it comes to building materials other than my timber package, is it better for my general contractor/builder to order them months in advance or wait?

A: General contractors (GCs) and builders typically have several suppliers with whom they work regularly. They have a good idea of the lead times required to get items to your home site, and they'll take this into account when scheduling. Bottom line: I wouldn't recommend that your builder order materials too far in advance. First, storage

space is at a premium, so most builders can't afford to stockpile materials that will sit around collecting dust for several months. Also, your builder will be invoiced for any materials as soon as they're delivered. Taking delivery on items well before they can be billed out to a client is something builders generally don't do, because it amounts to an interest-free loan!

However, an alert builder might hear of a good deal on something needed for your project — say, an awesome kitchen sink — and ask whether you want to purchase it. Then the builder might offer to store the piece for a fee. If you find a good deal on an item, talk to your builder about how to handle shipping, delivery and storage. Heavy items or large quantities may require a forklift or several strong arms, so don't let delivery come as a surprise.

Hard-to-find items or anything that requires acclimation time to adjust to "normal living conditions" should be ordered far enough in advance to allow for shipping delays or schedule changes. Hardwood flooring, for example, should be allowed to acclimate for at least a week before being installed. But beware: You don't want to order flooring so far in advance that it gets in the way of construction activities or has to be handled several times before it gets used.

Some items are included in your contractor's bid, but their cost isn't specified. For example, your contract may include a \$5,000 lighting allowance. If you come across a good lighting sale, buy the lights out of pocket and store them yourself. When the time comes, you can turn the fixtures over to your builder to install. Since you've already paid for them, they won't count toward your lighting allowance.

Q: My general contractor assures me that he has the best subcontractors in the state, but I want to make sure they're exceptional. What steps, if any, can I take to make myself sleep easier at night?

A: This one is tricky. Your GC is responsible for meeting the terms of your contract. His subcontractors, or "subs," answer to him — not you. In most cases, the contractor's bid is based on subs that he's familiar with and has used on past projects. If he thinks you'll inject yourself into his construction process, he might withdraw his contract since he can't be assured that his estimated costs are accurate. As an alternative, he may insist on a time-and-materials contract to cover his added uncertainty and risk. This doesn't mean that you have to be stuck with his sub choices if you encounter someone who isn't working to your expectations. But it's best to let the GC handle sub management and scheduling. If you become unhappy with shoddy work, use your checkbook as leverage. Simply tell your GC that you aren't satisfied and can't release payment until changes are made. The GC can either replace the offender or insist that he makes adjustments before getting one thin dime in compensation. The best time to check out subs is when you're reviewing your GC's references. Talk to several of the contractor's previous clients and ask about the subs he used. If someone mentions a sub who was exceptionally good or bad, ask your GC if he will be used on your project. Remember, a GC won't know all of the subs he'll be using until your project is

about to start or is underway. Most contractors have a list of plumbers, electricians, carpenters and others to hire — and their employment on your project depends upon availability.

Q: In the two months leading up to the delivery of my timber home package, what needs to happen at my home site besides excavation and foundation work?

A: Better start with an all-weather road to your building site. This usually means clearing trees, grading and laying a bed of gravel to handle the large trucks that will deliver construction materials. The road should be able to withstand downpours and snow storms.

With the road set, you or your builder can clear your building site. Get rid of stumps and debris, and make the site as clean as possible so there's plenty of room to store building materials. Stack firewood out of the way, and make sure the well and septic locations are marked so they don't become parking or storage areas.

This also is the time to bring in electricity and phone service. The sooner they're available on your job site, the better. Your builder might ask about setting up a temporary electric pole to hold the service panel until your house is under roof. It's a legitimate request, as work will proceed much faster if power is available.

Q: Are there any tools that I can use to keep organized in the months leading up to construction?

A: One of the advantages of using a general contractor is that he endures the headaches of scheduling and managing your project. Still, be sure you have an idea of how your project will proceed. There will be some things that you need to do at specific stages of construction, such as choosing lighting and plumbing fixtures, paint and stain colors, cabinets and hardware. Many builders provide you with an overall outline of what will be expected of you and when. Others will simply call you when it's time to make a decision. I'd begin a journal to record daily activities and remind yourself when deadlines are approaching. A digital camera is also a great way to record progress and construction details that will be hidden when the work is complete. Photographing pipes (before trenches are filled) and walls (before wall coverings are installed) will give you a permanent record should you ever need it to make repairs or remodel. When your home is complete, your journal and pictures will become a permanent record of your adventure.
