

TUB TROUBLE

Restoring dated, discolored bathtubs can be a challenge at apartment turn time, but owners have potential solutions at a variety of cost levels in their toolboxes.

BY JEFFREY LEE



Apartment veteran Frank Barefield knows that an old, chipped or discolored bathtub can sink the value of an otherwise fresh and updated unit.

“You can have a beautiful unit with updated countertops and cabinets,” says the owner of Birmingham, Ala.-based Abbey Residential, with 6,000 units throughout the Southeast, “but if a prospect peeks behind the shower curtain and sees an ugly tub, they’re going to say, ‘I’m not getting in that thing!’ ”

For owners like Barefield who purchase and reposition aging apartment communities, dated tubs can be a trying challenge. The seemingly simple solution would be to have contractors paint the tubs for \$95. Barefield says a new paint job is far from a permanent solution.

“The majority of tubs have to be painted every single year,” he says. “With a 7 percent cap rate, that’s worth \$1,357 in value per unit, which is huge.” It’s an expense Barefield says is not acceptable.

Apartment owners facing this bathtub

quandary have several options, each with advantages and disadvantages. After struggling with the problem for years, Barefield says replacing the tub entirely seems to be the only permanent solution, and some maintenance experts agree. But some lesser-known—and less proven—products offer potential solutions at a fraction of the cost.

Long-Term Fixes

When dealing with an old tub, the best and permanent solution is replacement,



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President
Abbey Residential, Birmingham, Ala.

states Pablo Paz, CAMT, National Maintenance and Safety Instructor for the NAA Education Institute. "Depending on the severity of the damage, some alternatives are better than others, but all are nevertheless temporary in my opinion," he says.

The downside to replacement is the time and cost required. Replacing a tub generally requires retiling and plumbing work, and if a unit's plumbing is particularly old, plumbing costs can quickly add up. Tub replacement also generally takes at least one day, versus only a few hours for most other solutions, according to IRO Dave Jurek, who also owns Absolutely Amazing Refinishing in St. Petersburg, Fla. It specializes in refinishing many surfaces, including bathtubs.

Nevertheless, Barefield says replacement often makes the most financial sense. He finds replacement generally costs \$475 to \$800, but says that a brand-new tub sells apartments more easily and can last 20 years or more with no expensive maintenance required. A new tub alone (excluding labor) starts at around \$100.

Another pricey solution is whole-tub liners, which are acrylic shells that go over top of an existing tub. Liners can require less installation time and don't disturb plumbing or take a unit offline for extended time periods.

On the other hand, many liners need to be custom-sized, Barefield says, which can send prices soaring above \$1,000 in some cases.

Plus, Paz notes, "Tub liners have the reputation of getting water trapped between them and the tub, causing many problems."

Short-Term Solutions

If owners don't want the expense of an entire tub replacement or liner installation, they can consider minor repairs for tubs needing less than three small spots through professional resurfacing contractors, Paz says. "This can be better than having it done in-house by maintenance technicians who might not have the proper training and materials for this type of work," Paz says.

Refinishing can be a viable option if performed by a reputable contractor,



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NAA Education Institute

agrees Jurek, who owns Jurek Properties with 10 single-family rental homes in Florida.

The process is fairly straightforward, he says. Refinishers typically will wash the tub with special chemicals, repair any chips or holes, prime the tub, roll on a non-skid ground acrylic material on the bottom, and then finish with a urethane coating.

Jurek says he charges \$185 and provides a five-year warranty, but says costs can be as much as \$300 in some markets.

Damage or deterioration mostly occurs on the bottoms of the tubs. A less expensive alternative for owners is purchasing inlays or bathmats that provide a new, clean finish for the bottom of the tub.

Products in this case range from \$10 to \$50; some models are peel-and-stick while others are glued down.

Paz says this option is useful for very short-term applications only. “They end up falling off and do not look and feel appropriate in my opinion,” he says.

Barefield has begun testing these products in recent months, and says it’s too soon to judge their success. “But if the inlays last three to four years and cost \$10 to \$50,” he notes, “I’m not replacing that tub.” **NAA**

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CAN YOU DO IT YOURSELF?

Do-it-yourself consultant Gene Austin weighs in on bathtubs.

Q. *I have an old bathtub that was painted on the inside by someone years ago. The paint is chipping and peeling.*

How can I remove the old paint and should I apply a new coating?

A. You should be able to remove the old paint with a strong paint remover such as Strypeeze, a paste-type remover that clings to the sides of the tub. If epoxy paint was used, the project will be more difficult because this paint is very tenacious, even when it is chipping. For old tubs, the paint might also contain lead, a health hazard. Before attempting removal, you should test the paint for lead. You can buy a test kit at some home centers or through a retail site on the Internet. Prices for test kits start at \$13. If the paint contains lead, check www.epa.gov/lead for guidance. If you decide to proceed with the paint removal, read the directions and cautions on the remover container. Use plenty of stripper and give it time to work. When the old paint is softened, scrape carefully with a plastic scraper such as the types used to remove ice from auto windshields. It is unlikely that you will be pleased with the tub’s finish after the paint has been removed—tubs in good condition are seldom painted. Epoxy paint, called tub-and-tile paint, is available at paint stores, home centers or retail sites online. An example is the Rustoleum Tub and Tile Refinishing Kit, priced about \$25.



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