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One hand inspecting the other

Some see Realtors' relationship with home inspectors as conflict of interest.

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Realtors call them "deal killers."

They're home inspectors that do an exhaustive search on behalf of a potential buyer, pointing out safety hazards and systems that work but are close to failure, according to Don Belmont, owner of Wise Eyes Home and Property Inspections Inc.

Belmont, 54, operates his business from the North Country but travels all over New Hampshire and Vermont doing home inspections. He markets his 1½-year-old business as one of the few that's not built to serve Realtors.

Like a growing number of independent home inspectors, Belmont sees the link between New Hampshire's real estate and home inspection industries as a conflict of interest – one he says is not being adequately addressed.

New Hampshire is one of about 20 states that does not regulate home inspectors. Here, a seller's agent typically provides a potential buyer with a list of recommended home inspectors. And yes, that's the same agent who stands to make a commission off the sale.

"Who do you recommend? Do you recommend the guy who is known to be quite the snoop . . . or do you recommend the guy who's brand new in the business?" Belmont said. "I'm not one of these, 'all realtors are dishonest.' What I point to is a real conflict of interest."

Legislation to regulate home inspectors has surfaced several times in recent years, to no avail. Late last month, a Senate bill that would have established a licensing board was sent back to committee, which delays a vote until next year.

The move doesn't bode well for the bill's eventual passage.

That's upsetting to James Quinlan, who purchased a home in Nashua last year after an inspection showed no major problems but discovered soon after the house had mold and needed extensive plumbing and electrical work.

Quinlan contacted The Telegraph two weeks ago, while the Senate legislation was still pending. A story on his situation and the lack of industry standards drew response from home inspectors all over New England.

Most inspectors support industry regulations, but there's no consensus on a single set of standards. That's partly because the leading national home inspection organizations don't see eye to eye.

Belmont, a member of the National Association of Certified Home Inspectors, said he did not support the Senate legislation because it would have rendered his credentials useless.

NACHI has been criticized because it allows inspectors to take an online test that is not proctored.

Belmont said the licensing standards would have limited home inspectors to taking a certification test that's associated with the rival national organization, the American Society of Home Inspectors.

There are some home inspectors who are members of both, but the handful of inspectors who contacted The Telegraph expressed strong allegiance for one or the other.

According to Belmont, the legislation was also flawed because it failed to address the conflict of interest issue.

Dennis Robitaille, director of the Independent Home Inspectors of North America, points out that some states, Massachusetts for example, have set up a firewall between realtors and home inspectors.

In Massachusetts, where home inspectors must be licensed to work, realtors are prohibited from requiring a potential buyer to use a certain home inspector, Robitaille said.

Robitaille, a former ASHI member, says his organization of independent inspectors is the only one that does not solicit real estate agents for client leads. Robitaille operates Massachusetts-based Able Home Inspection Inc., and the company's Web site also makes reference to "deal killers."

It's unclear why a vote on the Senate bill was delayed. Some home inspectors, mainly NACHI members, lobbied against it out of concern that the licensing board would not accept the national certifications they paid for and studied for.

But others, including David Roth, president of the New Hampshire Coalition for Licensing Home Inspectors, were in full support.

Roth, an ASHI member, and about 60 other home inspectors crafted the bill out of dissatisfaction with a competing House bill, which is now stalled in committee, he wrote in an e-mail to The Telegraph.

Roth takes issue with NACHI's method of certification, noting in the e-mail that someone who's never inspected a home but produces fake inspection records could receive photo identification saying he or she is a home inspector.

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