

FOCUS

Hidden foundation problems can collapse many home sales

By Angelle Bergeron
Contributing Writer

LEE CANTRELLE had no idea his foundation was rotting until he decided to sell the Metairie home he had purchased in 1997. It had passed all previous inspections. Little did he know the contractor had cut corners, which exposed the home's supporting piers to the weather instead of encasing them in concrete footings.

He promised to offset repair costs in the sale price but Cantrelle couldn't find a buyer willing to deal with the headaches. He took the house off the market and is paying Roubion Construction Company Inc. nearly \$20,000 to jack up the house, remove and replace the exposed sections of the home's 47 pilings and install concrete footings and piers.

"The house hasn't even moved but nobody wants to buy it because the pilings are rotting," said Dennis Roubion, fifth-generation owner of New Orleans' Roubion Construction Company Inc., established in 1868 and specializing in foundation repairs.

The price tag isn't unusual for foundation repairs, which can run much more, Roubion said.

"I look in people's faces and give them a

price to correct a problem and it's really a tough situation," said Roubion. "They think they have something that will last 30 years and then they get stuck with \$15,000 or \$18,000 in repairs."

Roubion said so many slab houses are failing that his construction company concentrates primarily on home foundation repairs instead of high-rise leveling and other commercial work.

Roubion has seen all sorts of foundation failures since he worked on his first leveling job with his father at the age of 12.

The most common failures involve concrete slabs. "Slabs came into the area from Texas in the 1950s, after the second World War with the GI bill," Roubion said. The bill fostered fast, mass-produced development in Lakeview, Metairie, St. Bernard and the West Bank. Many homes were built on unsupported slabs, which in New Orleans unstable moisture and soil conditions, is like placing a heavy stone on a thin sheet of plywood. It will hold firm temporarily but soon settles against the shape of its heavy load or fails completely, according to Roubion.

In 1986, at the behest of the Home Builders Association of Greater New Orleans, the city's Office of Safety and

Permits mandated pilings for all residential and commercial foundations.

"The HBA wanted to make certain all houses maintained a certain standard," said Bhola Dhume, deputy director of Safety and Permits. "The feeling was that when members of the HBA built a product properly, but unscrupulous builders didn't, consumers didn't understand the difference in price variance and the good builders were being undercut."

The codes are reviewed periodically by a committee appointed by the American Society of Civil Engineers' New Orleans Chapter. The last review was in January, Dhume said. Because variances exist in soil throughout the state, each parish adopts its own requirements, said Michael Centineo, director of Safety and Permits. He said in some parishes in New Orleans, there are compressible soils, which have poor drainage or an excessive amount of fill making the soil loose enough to swell and deflate with moisture, much like a sponge. Baton Rouge has more clay, which swells with moisture.

These soil movements help create foundation problems, which are eventually exposed by excessive floor sloping, sticking doors or cracks in brick veneer, Sheetrock and plaster. A 1-inch slope within 15 feet is generally considered level but anything in

excess should be repaired, said Paul Knight, president of Cable Lock Foundation Repair in New Orleans.

"On the West Bank, everything from Holiday Drive to the Intercoastal are slabs



Dennis Roubion, president of New Orleans' Roubion Construction Company Inc., points to a rotted, exposed pier on a Metairie house in which 12 of the 47 support piers must be cut out and replaced with new supports encased in concrete footings — a project that could cost as much as \$20,000.

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with no pilings," Knight said. "It's more a matter of when they will settle, not if."

The minimum requirements aren't sufficient for soil conditions in much of the area, Knight said. Requirements stipulate pilings to be driven to a specific depth, which may not reach the point of refusal when a piling is pushed so far into the ground that the house is lifted up by the resistance. When a piling meets the point of refusal, it is considered planted in solid ground.

Knight brought Cable Lock's proprietary system to Louisiana in 1997 and says it's the first to offer a lifetime warranty. "If you are going to spend a big chunk of change, you want a warranty with that," he said.

The Cable Lock system involves hydraulically pushing by a steel cable segments of piles beneath an existing structure. The method ensures the piles are driven straight to the point of refusal, Knight said. "We don't have to do soil testing because my system is in essence a soil test," he said. "A gauge is attached to the hydraulic pump so we know when the appropriate load and depth are reached."

Construction officials say adequate support for residential homes should be determined by soil testing and load, which is routine for commercial construction. In the meantime, the

abundance of aging, settling structures keep foundation repair companies busy.

Out-of-state construction companies, unfamiliar with Louisiana's soil conditions, are hoping to cash in, Roubion said, and homeowners should beware of quick fixes and guarantees. For example, on Cantrelle's home, some contractors quoted a price for raising the structure and adding onto the existing piles. But the piles would have continued to rot and a final remedy would cost more.

Before embarking on foundation repair, do your homework, said Cynthia Albert, director of operations and the media for the Better Business Bureau of the Greater New Orleans area. "Especially with foundation repairs, if you don't know what you're doing, you can cost someone a lot of money and make the house structurally unsafe," Albert said. "Ask friends for recommendations. Don't pay more than a third up front. Obtain a written contract with a start and completion date, and make sure you are dealing with a reputable company."

Swindlers often claim repairs are necessary. Roubion suggests consulting a home inspector who is also a civil engineer. "They won't give you the solution to remedy it but they'll let you know what you're going to have to deal with," he said.

The BBB can tell you how long the company's been in business, if they've had a pattern of complaints and how they've handled them. "If they don't know what they're doing, it could be a catastrophe," Albert said. •