

Don't Touch That Valve!

By Martin Newmark
303-554-5840
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One conundrum that comes up during an inspection is a valve that's turned off. The kind of valve I'm talking about is the one that shuts off water to a toilet, to a faucet (the ones under a sink), or a clothes washer. Other valves are main water valves to the home and gas valves for gas fired appliances. For the inspector the problem with not doing it is that the client or realtor may think that they're not doing their job. And frankly, when I first started to inspect, I felt the same way. I wanted to be able to tell my clients what was wrong, not that the valve is simply "off at the toilet," or the "toilet did not operate."

I've learned a few lessons in this department, and I'd like to share a few of them with you. Before doing so, you should know that Standards of Practice for NAHI's (National Association of Home Inspectors) and ASHI's (American Society of Home Inspectors) do not require inspectors to turn valves on. These stories should help you understand why.

I was inspecting a nice home and the master bath toilet didn't work. I looked in the tank and there was no water. I noticed the valve was off so I reached down and turned it on. The tank filled, no problem. I flushed it and water began leaking out between the tank and the bowl onto the floor. Luckily I saw it and was able to clean it up before it leaked through the carpet to the ceiling below. I made note of the defect and decided to turn the toilet off at the valve before I leave. When I did the valve leaked, dripping on the carpet continuously, when it was completely shut off. Surely this dripping would cause damage if I couldn't stop it. I turned the valve back on and the dripping stopped, but if anybody flushed it there would be trouble. I was able to finish the inspection, and when I did I let the listing agent know that a plumber would be needed.

The next time I was at an inspection and the toilet didn't work I decided not to turn the valve on. I had learned my lesson. This frustrated the realtor so I said he was welcome to turn it on. He just needed to know, that if a problem arose, he had to deal with it, and was liable for any damage that may be caused. He decided to take the risk and when he turned on the valve it started leaking and whatever he did, it would not stop leaking. This unit was a second floor condo. He ended up having to make an emergency call to a plumber.

Another time I was in a home the agent asked me to test the clothes washer. I turned the unit on and I heard it open the valve but no water ran into the machine. Then I noticed that the valves were off at the wall. This is where I drew the line. The client asked if he could turn them on and I explained that if he did he was liable for any problems, but he decided to go ahead. When he turned on the hot water valve, water began to pour out from the back of the washer. He turned off that valve and the flow stopped. When he turned on the cold water valve

water began to spray out of the valve itself. When he turned that valve off it continued to leak. This would have been a big problem if it were a second floor laundry, but luckily this washer was on a concrete floor in a basement with a drain nearby.

All these stories ended without a big problem. But if you play with fire, eventually you're going to get burned. I've learned that if a valve is off at the wall, there's usually a good reason for it. Inspectors aren't plumbers. We don't carry the tools to fix these types of problems should they occur, and we're not licensed or insured to do it either. It may make your transaction go smoother, but think twice before you decide to do a plumber's job.