

Most owners believe the fence project begins when the contractor pulls up with a notepad. It does not. It begins weeks earlier, at the kitchen table, with decisions the owner has to make alone, and the owners who skip that step discover it the moment three estimators hand them three wildly different numbers for the same yard.

Here is the truth about quotes: they are only as good as the preparation behind them. A contractor can measure your property, but they cannot measure your intentions. If you have not decided what the fence is for, what it is made of, and where it belongs, you will get three different versions of someone else's guess, and none of them will be cheap enough to forgive the confusion.

This article covers everything to gather, check, and decide before you request a single quote, including the questions to ask before hiring that you should be ready to answer yourself. Because the first interview in this process is not with the contractor. It is with you.

The Questions to Ask Before Hiring Start With Yourself

Before any phone call, answer these honestly. They are the questions to ask before hiring, aimed inward, and every contractor you speak to will be making assumptions about them the moment you describe the project.

- What is the fence for? Privacy, containing a dog, keeping kids near the house, security, noise, wind, or marking a boundary are different projects that happen to share the word "fence."
- How long do you plan to own the property? A fence you will enjoy for three years should not cost the same as one built for twenty.
- How much maintenance are you willing to do? Wood rewards the owner who stains and seals. Vinyl and aluminum reward the owner who would rather not think about it.
- What height do you need, really? Six feet of privacy is a different budget than four feet of boundary line, and the difference is worth deciding before anyone quotes.
- What is your budget envelope, and where did it come from? A number pulled from a neighbor's story is not a budget. Know what the project can cost before you hear the first estimate, and know why.

The owners who can answer these get quotes they can compare. The owners who cannot get quotes that quietly disagree with each other, and the disagreement is usually the owner's own indecision showing up on paper.

What a Contractor Will Ask You

Turn the conversation around for a moment. A good estimator will ask you questions, and the quality of your answers decides the quality of your quote. Expect to be asked how the crew will reach the back of the property, whether the fence line is shared with a neighbor, whether the neighbor has agreed to anything, when you want the work done, and what happens to the old fence.

If the estimator asks none of these things and goes straight to measuring, take note. The person who does not ask about access or the neighbor is building the quote on assumptions, and you will meet those assumptions again later, in the change orders.

Prepare your answers the way you would prepare for a job interview, because that is what this is. The contractor is interviewing you as much as you are interviewing them, and the owner who answers well gets a better, firmer quote than the owner who answers with shrugs.

The other thing to prepare is your own availability. When can you be on site for the walkthrough? Who makes the decision about the material, you or a partner? If you are the decision maker, say so. Estimators work better with one clear throat to answer to, and a project with two owners who disagree about cedar versus vinyl is a project that stalls at the estimate stage.

Know Your Property Line Before Anyone Knocks

The single most expensive mistake in residential fencing is building on the wrong side of the line. A Vaughan homeowner once discovered her old fence sat a foot inside the true property line, which meant her new fence, built on the same line as the old one because nobody checked, gave away a strip of yard and created a dispute that outlived the fence itself.

Before you request a quote, know where your property actually ends. Find your survey if you have one, or have a surveyor locate the boundary pins. Walk the line yourself and look for markers. Ask your contractor whether they will verify the line or build to your instructions, and understand that if they build to your instructions, the responsibility is yours. Verify your property boundaries with a surveyor or your municipality before anyone digs.

Do not assume the old fence marks the line. Fences wander. They get built to the inside of the line to avoid disputes, or to the outside by mistake, or they follow a grade that has nothing to do with the survey. The old fence is a hint, not a fact. On a corner lot, check both lines, because the side street line is the one owners forget, and it is the one the city tends to notice.

If you cannot find your survey, ask your municipality what records exist, or budget for a surveyor's visit to locate the pins. The cost of confirming the line is small next to the cost of moving a fence. Owners who skip this step are not saving money. They are betting the neighbor never checks.

The Shared Fence Conversation

If the fence sits on a shared boundary, and in most Toronto and GTA neighborhoods it does, talk to the neighbor before you talk to contractors. This conversation is awkward for everyone, which is exactly why it belongs before the quote, not after it.

Start with the basics: are they open to a new fence at all, and are they willing to share the cost? Some neighbors will split everything down the middle. Some will offer a fixed amount. Some will decline, and you will build on your side of the line and own the whole bill. All of those outcomes are workable. The unworkable one is discovering the neighbor's position after the posts are in the ground.

Agree on the basics before the quote: the material, the height, which side faces which property, and who gets the good side. In a shared-fence situation, the good side is the side that faces your neighbor, and it is worth deciding that with words instead of discovering it with feelings. If you reach an agreement, put it in writing. A short note is enough, and it protects both of you if either property changes hands. For townhouses and condos, check the rules of your corporation before committing to anything; the decision may not be entirely yours.

Site Realities: Access, Terrain, and Utilities

While the paperwork settles, walk your own property with fresh eyes and note what a contractor will have to work with. Narrow side yards change how material gets to the back. A steep slope changes how posts get set. A ravine lot along the Don or the Humber has drainage and erosion realities that a flat Brampton lot does not.

Heavy clay soil, common across much of the GTA, shifts with the freeze-thaw cycle and can heave shallow posts out of line over a few winters. Ask yourself where **automatic gate systems** the fence runs, what the soil looks like, and whether the line crosses any low spots where water collects. These are the details you can hand to an estimator, and the estimator who asks about them is the estimator who has been burned by them before.

Measure the rough run yourself with a measuring wheel or a long tape before you call. You do not need survey accuracy. You need enough to describe the project in feet, because "about eighty feet, maybe a bit more" produces a much better first conversation than "a fence in the backyard."

Check for utilities and easements before anyone digs. Hydro corridors, easement strips, and buried service lines run through more properties than owners realize. The contractor should arrange utility locates before any digging, so ask about it, and verify the requirements with your local utility or municipality. If your line crosses an easement, find out what that means for the fence before you build it, because the rules are not always what they seem.

What You Should Have Decided Before the Quote

By the time you call a contractor, this list should be answered. Not perfectly, because a good contractor will refine your choices, but answered enough that the quote means something:

- Material, or two materials you want to compare.
- Height, and whether it is uniform along the whole run.
- Gates: how many, where, and how wide. A walk gate and a vehicle gate are different projects.
- Which side faces the neighbor, if the fence is shared.
- What happens to the old fence: removal included in the scope, or handled separately.
- When you want the work done, and whether you are flexible on timing.
- Whether you want a fixed price or are open to an estimate with defined variables.

Bringing this list to the first call changes the conversation immediately. Instead of "I need a fence, what does it cost?", you get to say "I'm looking at cedar, six feet, eighty feet of run, one walk gate, old fence removed. Can you walk it next week?" A contractor can price that in their head, roughly, and the site visit becomes a confirmation instead of an exploration.

How Preparation Changes the Quotes You Get

Here is what changes when you show up prepared. First, the quotes become comparable, because every estimator is pricing the same scope. Second, the estimators spend their visit time on the interesting questions, soil, slope, access, drainage, instead of walking you through material brochures from zero. Third, the number tends to firm up, because fewer unknowns in the scope means fewer contingencies hidden in the price. Fourth, the start date gets closer, because the decisions that stall projects are already made.

Preparation also changes how contractors treat you. An owner who has a survey, a neighbor agreement, and a material preference reads as someone who will be easy to work with, and easy to work with is worth real money to a busy crew, in scheduling priority and in the small courtesies that make a project pleasant.

Commercial Prep: A Different Checklist

If the project is commercial, a strip mall, a parking lot, an industrial yard, the preparation list is longer and the stakes are higher. Add these to your list before requesting quotes:



- Who owns the fence: you, the tenant, or the landlord? Settle that in writing before anyone quotes.
- What access do tenants, deliveries, and emergency vehicles need? Map gates and openings before the estimator arrives.
- When can the crew work? Loading areas, customer parking, and business hours all constrain the schedule, and the constraints belong in the scope.
- What are the approval requirements? Verify current requirements with your municipality before the quote, and ask the contractor which approvals they handle.
- What is the security expectation? A fence around a parking lot is security infrastructure, and its height, lighting interaction, and gate design should be specified, not assumed.
- What is the maintenance plan? A commercial fence is an asset with a service life, and the plan for maintaining it should exist before the contract does.

Commercial estimators work from specifications, and the owner who shows up with specifications gets a better quote than the owner who shows up with questions. The questions are for the phone call. The specifications are for the estimate.

Quotes Are Answers. Preparation Is the Question.

Everything in this article can be summarized in one line: the questions to ask before hiring start with the ones you ask yourself. The contractor's quote is an answer, and an answer is only as good as the question it responds to. Know your line, settle your neighbor conversation, decide your material, and understand your site, and the quotes you receive will finally be talking about the same fence.

Then, and only then, is it time to call a contractor. The notepad comes out after the homework is done.