

Two owners on the same street ordered the same fence last spring. Same cedar, same height, same length, both on the property line. One quote came in at roughly half the other, and the cheaper contractor was the first to finish. He was also the one who set the posts too shallow, used thinner boards, and was gone by the time the first frost heaved a corner post out of the ground. The second owner paid more, waited longer, and now has a fence that has stood through two winters without a wobble. Spotting red flags in fence quotes is rarely about the number alone. It is about what the number implies about scope, materials, and the decisions made to reach it.

For property owners across the GTA, from Toronto townhouses to side lots in Brampton and Vaughan, from Mississauga and Oakville to Pickering, Whitby, and Oshawa, a fence is one of those purchases where the cheapest option usually costs the most in the end. This guide is not here to push you toward the most expensive bid. It is here to help you read the money, understand what drives it, and recognize when a quote is telling you something it does not say out loud.

Two Bids for the Same Fence: What the Difference Actually Means

When two contractors look at the same property and return different totals, the difference is never a mystery. It is the sum of small choices. One estimator walked the line, counted the corners, studied the grade, and priced demolition and disposal. The other stood at the gate, asked how many feet of fence you wanted, and wrote a number in a notebook. One quoted the material they actually install. The other quoted the cheapest material that could pass for the same thing. One planned for the frost line and the clay. The other planned for a sunny afternoon. None of these choices is visible on the bottom line. Every one of them is visible when you ask how the number was built.

Your first job with any bid is to ask for the build-up. How many posts, at what spacing, set to what depth, with how much concrete each. What material, what grade, what gauge. How many gates, and what hardware. Is demolition included, is disposal included, is cleanup included. A contractor who can walk you through the arithmetic is showing you the fence they intend to build. A contractor who treats the number as a black box is showing you something else. The build-up also tells you who is pricing the job: the person who will run it, or a salesperson who will hand it off after the signature. The difference between those two bids on that street was not luck. It was the difference between a price and an estimate built from a real plan.

What a Low Number Is Really Telling You

A bid far below the field deserves suspicion, but a specific kind. Ask what was left out, because something was. The common omissions are predictable: removal and disposal of the old fence, concrete for every post rather than every other one, corner and end posts, hardware that will not rust within two seasons, access for equipment on a sloped lot, and the labor that disappears when a rock shelf or a buried stump turns one hole into a two-hour struggle. Each omission is a hidden line item, and hidden line items become change orders the moment the crew hits the ground.



Material grade is where cheap bids quietly live. Two quotes can both say cedar and describe different fences, because the grade of the lumber, the thickness of the boards, the spacing, and the treatment all change what you end up with. The same is true for steel, where gauge and coating separate a fence that rusts from a fence that lasts. When a number is low, ask the contractor to name the specifics out loud. If the specifics match the higher

bids, you have found a genuinely efficient crew and you should hire them. If the specifics drift, you have found the gap, and you now know exactly what the low number was buying.

What a High Number Might Be Hiding

High bids are not automatically honest bids. A premium number can mean a crew that is in demand, works carefully, and backs its work. It can also mean a contractor who priced the job high because they did not want it, or who is layering margin on top of a subcontractor's margin, or who simply assumes owners cannot tell the difference. The way to find out is to ask what the higher number buys, and to keep asking until the answer is concrete. Better material is a concrete answer. More time on site is a concrete answer. A project manager who answers the phone, a crew that shows up on the booked week, a clear process for fixing problems after the build, all of those are concrete answers. We are worth it is not an answer.

One legitimate reason a number runs high is terrain and access. A fence on a ravine lot, down a slope, over buried rock, or behind a house with a narrow gate and no side access costs more to build, and the extra cost shows up in the quote of the contractor who actually looked. The contractor who did not look will quote low, then discover the access problem on day one. When you compare bids, compare them against the same property reality. A high number that reflects the actual difficulty of your site is not a red flag. It is the price of the truth.

Spotting Red Flags in Fence Quotes Line by Line

Read every quote as a list of promises, because that is what it is. Work through the line items and test each one against your property. The posts: what spacing, what depth, what concrete, what soil assumptions, and whether the quote acknowledges the frost heave and clay that shape most GTA winters. The panels and pickets: what material, what grade, what finish, what spacing between boards, and whether the number changes if you want a specific look. The gates: how many, what width, what hardware, and whether the hardware is priced to match the gate or chosen to shave the total. The demolition: is the old fence coming out, who takes it away, and where does it go. The access: how the crew gets materials to the back corner of your lot, and what the quote assumes about your slope, your soil, and your side yard. The schedule: a start date, a realistic duration, and a weather plan for a season that does not cooperate.

Watch how the quote prices the work itself. Some contractors quote by the linear foot, one number that swallows every detail of the job. Others itemize: posts, panels, concrete, hardware, labor, disposal. The itemized quote is easier to check and easier to compare, which is exactly why some contractors avoid it. A per-foot number is not automatically a red flag, but it is a reason to ask for the breakdown before you sign, because the breakdown is where the assumptions live.

Ask each contractor to price the same options so the comparison is honest. If you want a comparison, you need common ground: same material, same height, same gates, same assumptions about demolition. A quote that excludes the old fence and one that includes it will differ on paper for reasons that have nothing to do with quality, and owners routinely pick the wrong one for exactly that reason. When the field is quoting the same scope, the differences that remain are differences in efficiency, material, and judgment, and those are the differences you can actually use. Set aside the quotes that will not play by that rule. A contractor who refuses to price the same scope is refusing to be compared, and that refusal is a red flag on its own.

The Options That Separate a Competitive Quote From a Trap

Material choice drives more of the money than any other decision, and it is the decision owners make first and regret last. Cedar is the classic GTA choice, with a look most people love and maintenance requirements that

follow. Composite and vinyl trade the natural look for lower upkeep. Steel and aluminum offer strength and a longer life at a different price point. Chain link remains the practical workhorse for yards, parks, and commercial edges. There is no correct answer, only the answer that fits your property, your budget, and how much maintenance you actually intend to do. What matters for the quote is that the material you discussed is the material on the page, in the grade and gauge you agreed to.

The height, the gate configuration, and the corner details are the same kind of decision. Each one changes the total, and each one is a place where a low bid quietly economizes. A quote that assumes a standard gate where you need a wide one for equipment, or a vehicle-height gate for a laneway, will not survive contact with the driveway. For commercial and multi-unit owners, the considerations multiply: security [Click here for more info](#) needs, vehicle access, liability, municipal approvals, and maintenance planning for a fence that will be used harder than any backyard fence. Whether you manage a strip mall, a parking lot, or an industrial yard, the quote should reflect how the fence will actually be used, not how a residential fence is used. And on the residential side, the maintenance plan matters just as much: a fence you plan to stain every few years is a different purchase from one you expect to ignore, and the material named in the quote should match the reality of how much upkeep you will actually do.

Timing is a decision too. Demand in the GTA clusters in the spring and early summer, and the contractor who is available immediately in June may be available for a reason. Booking in the off-season, when crews are slower, can change both the schedule and the negotiating room, and ordering materials early avoids the summer pinch. The rhythm differs across the region as well: a crew with steady work in Burlington and Milton may slot you in differently than one stretched across Aurora and Newmarket, and the schedule in the quote tells you which one you are dealing with. None of this tells you which bid to take. It tells you what to weigh: scope, material, terrain, timing, and the behavior of the person quoting. Weigh those, and the red flags in the numbers tend to surface on their own.

One habit ties all of this together. When a number looks suspicious in either direction, ask the contractor to explain it in terms of the factors that actually drive cost: linear footage, height, gates, material, terrain, access, demolition, post installation, finish, and the season you book. A quote that can be explained is a quote you can trust. A quote that cannot is the red flag, whatever the total says. Spotting red flags in fence quotes is not about mistrusting the industry. It is about making every bidder show their work, and letting the honest ones prove how easy that is.