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With Drama Quieting Over Landlord Test Results, City Resumes Talks With Housing Agency

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- [ILLUSTRATION BY JON SPERRY](#)

The Fair Housing Council of Oregon—the nonprofit whose [test results of potentially discriminatory Portland landlords](#) this spring produced outrage and then [political drama](#)—is back in talks to work with the city's housing bureau, its executive director has revealed.

The announcement, as well as an [outside audit](#) and other [statements](#) meant to help rehabilitate FHCO's image before the city presumably rehires the group, mark another twist what's been a delicate, awkward and contentious series of events for both parties.

First, everyone flipped out when two shocking findings were handed to the city this spring: Latinos seeking rental housing reported facing discrimination in 17 of 25 tests compared to prospective white tenants, while blacks said they were treated differently in 15 of 25 tests.

Weeks later, the *Oregonian* and others got wind of the publicly announced results and [led a crusade](#) pushing the city to take action against the landlords, with the city releasing their names (a list we were the first to publish). But it turned out the test results weren't substantive enough for that kind of action, as experts suggested the *Mercury* back in May.

By August, the state Bureau of Labor and Industries had waded in to say [FHCO's results were flawed and contained errors](#)—and that there'd be no action taken on discipline. And that was about when the city, in a move that some saw as trying to save face, decided to announce it was putting contract talks with FHCO for more landlord tests on hiatus.

But today Moloy Good, FHCO's executive director, said contract talks had quietly resumed with the city. He pointed to the outside audit, which actually blessed some of FHCO's methods and also included recommendations on how to improve communication and fix mistakes going forward.

"It was kind of a mutual reaching out to each other," Good said. "I don't know their intent was ever to end the relationship."

Daniel Ledezma, communications director for the housing bureau, said officials are working with FHCO on education and outreach, and that FHCO's audit of its practices (which has yet to be deeply reviewed by the city) would be a factor for the city as it decided on an agency for another round of landlord tests. FHCO is the only local agency that provides such a service.

"It will certainly help to inform that decision," she says.

FHCO's latest report comes off as something of an attempt to repair its image after a summer of city spin. The city took a beating after the *Oregonian* reported that housing officials never intended to take disciplinary action against landlords, and the city, in turn, seemed to use the BOLI findings as a way to shunt blame on FHCO.

The report defends FHCO's methods but acknowledges that mistakes were made—perhaps the biggest being that the agency failed to communicate more clearly with the city over how its findings ought to be used. The audits, while shocking, required follow-up investigation before legal action could be taken.

Good allowed "we certainly would have been interested in doing additional testing," but that "we hadn't talked about that with the city, which we really should have."

FHCO's report says the city foreclosed on that option when it released the names of the landlords. More communication, he says, might have persuaded the city not to release the list in the name of conducting a deeper investigation. It seemed the city may have thought it was getting results that were strong enough to hold up in a discipline process—but housing officials, on their end, also didn't make their aims clear.

"If your purpose is not to do enforcement, if you just want a snapshot," Good says, "we'll give that to you. We'll give you recommendations as well about how to move forward. That was something we learned from this."