

The Oregonian

Portland officials promise results on housing discrimination testing by April

*By Brad Schmidt
February 10, 2015*

Four years after pledging annual undercover testing to root out housing discrimination, Portland leaders remain empty-handed.

That could soon change.

City officials, who promised such "audit" testing in 2011, say they'll issue a report on new testing by April.

The report should provide a fresh look at barriers in Portland's overheated rental market to minorities, families and people with disabilities. It will also offer the first comparison to a 2010 audit that found African American and Latino testers often faced different treatment than whites.

That audit, despite questions about its methodology, provoked community outrage and prompted city leaders to unveil an action plan that included the pledge to conduct annual tests.

Last week, Portland officials insisted they had made progress but declined to discuss it beyond saying results are on the way. Commissioner Dan Saltzman, who oversees the Portland Housing Bureau, issued a statement saying generally that the city remains committed to fighting rental discrimination.

"We are disappointed that testing has taken so long, but we also know that the integrity of the process and the accuracy of the findings are critical to our ability to address housing disparities," the statement read.

Audit testing became an issue in 2011 after the city reported the results of the 2010 audit but offered no plan to penalize landlords. In that audit, the city hired nonprofit Fair Housing Council of Oregon to send out pairs of testers posing as prospective renters to compare whether landlords treated blacks or Latinos differently from whites. In about two-thirds of cases, they did.

Portland officials later said the results were unreliable and unenforceable. But during the uproar, Commissioner Nick Fish in June 2011 promised annual audit testing and public results as part of his "bold" plan to "end discrimination" in rental housing.

"The plan will not change things overnight. It will take time and effort," Fish, then in charge of the Housing Bureau, said in September 2011 as the City Council voted 4-0 in support. "But as long as I'm on this council, I commit to making this a core priority."

Fish declined an interview request for this story. An aide said Fish, who lost oversight of the Housing Bureau in February 2013, had no role in the city's latest testing.

Under Fish, housing officials in 2012 searched for a company to conduct testing. In April 2013, the city hired the Fair Housing Center of Washington under a \$70,000 contract to oversee testing by the Fair Housing Council of Oregon.

Portland's contract calls for 50 tests involving pairs of undercover testers and 20 follow-up tests. The city "hoped" the testing would be complete by 2013 but officials could report no progress in January 2014.

Portland's contract also allows for enforcement, although the responsibility for filing complaints is murky. Portland "authorizes" the Fair Housing Center of Washington to use the results for enforcement after consulting with city officials. Additionally, city attorneys "may" use the testing information to file litigation, although nothing in the contract prohibits the contractor from filing complaints if Portland doesn't.

Newly released records show the city has made one payment under its contract, \$25,098.98 last May, which would cover about three dozen tests at a cost of \$700 each.

Traci Manning, director of the Housing Bureau, declined an interview request. In a statement, bureau spokeswoman Martha Calhoun said the Fair Housing Center of Washington "initially deferred" testing for fear that media coverage would compromise it.

She didn't say when testing began or if it has ended. She added that Portland's tight rental market makes accurate audit testing difficult, adding to delays.

The Portland metro area had the nation's second-lowest rental vacancy rate in 2013, at 3.1 percent according to U.S. Census data, behind only San Jose, California. In Denver and Indianapolis, two areas with greater rates of available rental units, fair housing officials conducted audit tests in 2012 and 2013 in about six months.

Given the number of tests scheduled in Portland and the city's past controversy, two years isn't out of line, said Shanna Smith, president of the National Fair Housing Alliance.

Such testing, she said, is "critical because most people have a hard time identifying if they've been discriminated against because it's so subtle."

In addition to testing, the city also pledged in 2011 to increase the number of fair-housing cases referred for litigation, increase landlord training, launch a public information campaign and report on overall progress every year.

Officials have produced two reports, one spanning July 2011 to March 2013, the second July 2012 to June 2013. The reports show that fair-housing cases dropped year to year, landlord trainings increased and the public information campaign occurred, though a few months late.

Calhoon said she couldn't immediately say when the Housing Bureau would produce a new report.

The 2011 plan also created a Fair Housing Advocacy Committee to review audit tests and release results. Tuesday, at the committee's quarterly meeting, members will be asked to delete wording directing them to provide "guidance and oversight" on audit testing.

Committee chairman Jason Trombley said he couldn't explain the reasoning for the change but that he didn't think it would affect members' ability to review data. Calhoon said she couldn't explain the revision, either.

Calhoon also said she couldn't say whether Portland will commit to future audit testing or whether the proposed fiscal 2016 budget includes money for it.

Saltzman, in his statement, said: "As a City, we take Fair Housing very seriously and are committed to ensuring that no Portlander is barred from housing opportunity due to discrimination."

Portland Mayor Charlie Hales may be coming to your neck of the woods soon

*By Andrew Theen
February 10, 2015*

Portland Mayor Charlie Hales is taking his 2015 political agenda on the road in a series of speeches and mini town hall sessions for residents who don't typically get to hear from the elected leader.

Rose City mayors give their state of the city address at the City Club of Portland's Friday Forum-- in a semi-elegant setting with white tablecloths, and the clinking of lunchtime dishware -- in downtown's Sentinel hotel.

Hales did the same last month, marking his third state of the city address.

The speech is later broadcasted on radio and streamed online, but the audience doesn't include all Portlanders.

But spokesman Dana Haynes said the mayor wanted to take his speech on the road to smaller events at neighborhood troops. Last week, Hales spoke to the Hollywood Boosters. On Tuesday, Hales will speak with the Rosewood community in east Portland.

Jenny Glass, executive director of the nonprofit Rosewood Initiative, said Hales' office contacted the neighborhood group to set up the meeting.

Glass attended the state of the city speech this year, but she said many neighborhood residents in the east Portland neighborhood do not. She said Hales' presence shows east Portland residents that "people in positions of power care."

"I think actually his state of the city address downtown was extremely relevant to us," she noted, cited Hales' themes of economic development and opportunity for all residents and focus on public safety issues.

The neighborhood along Southeast Stark Street is in urgent need, Glass said, of transportation safety improvements. Hales and Commissioner Steve Novick spent much of 2014 campaigning for a new transportation funding mechanism. That plan is currently on hold as Salem lawmakers start their legislative session where statewide action could be a priority.

Glass said residents in the central city may not know that east Portlanders face issues that are much different than the inner city. "We're talking about really basic stuff," she added, like sidewalks and north-south bus service.

The meeting is scheduled for 6 p.m. at the Rosewood Initiative, 16126 S.E. Stark Street. Haynes said the mayor will also make appearances the Gateway, N.E. 42nd Avenue, East Portland Chamber of Commerce Jade District and other neighborhoods.

A Portland with no traffic deaths and good streets? Plan sets slow path forward

*By Brad Schmidt
February 10, 2015*

Imagine a Portland where no one dies on city streets.

Where three-quarters of the city's road system is in good shape.

Where there's a dedicated bike lane within a half-mile of nearly every home.

That's just part of the "bold and audacious" long-term vision for Portland's transportation future, as laid out in a new \$150,000 report released Tuesday by the Transportation Bureau and its director, Leah Treat.

Yes, those goals jump of the page. And city staff emphasize that for each, there is no actual time frame for when - or if - they'll actually be accomplished.

But transportation officials say their new "Portland Progress" work plan - and the 176 specific tasks it identifies for action over two years - may help Portland meet those goals.

Someday.

The work plan "lays out a bold and audacious vision for what our transportation future can be - a city of zero traffic fatalities with streets and systems that are the envy of the nation; an inclusive city where every resident and business has the opportunity to grow and thrive; and a sustainable place that supports the health of both people and planet," Treat wrote in an introduction for the report.

Treat announced her desire to create a two-year work plan when hired in 2013. But the plan has largely taken a backseat with the Transportation Bureau mired in an unsuccessful year-long process led by Mayor Charlie Hales and Commissioner Steve Novick to create new taxes or fees to pay for paving and safety projects.

The new work plan has five themes: Preserve and Operate; Vision Zero; Build a Future; Manage City Assets; and Health and Vitality.

For the first, Portland sets a goal that just 25 percent of its roads will be in poor or very poor condition. Today about half of roads rank poorly.

Similarly, the city also has a long ways to go on other overarching goals: 28 people died on Portland's roads last year, while only about 60 percent of residents live within a half-mile of a bike greenway or dedicated bike lane.

Art Pearce, who manages policy, planning and projects for the Transportation Bureau, said the city doesn't have a timeframe for when those goals might be met.

"The main focus of this document is on the actions and the action steps," he said.

Most action items include some easily quantifiable measures. Some examples for the next two years:

- 100 lane miles of preventative maintenance annually
- use new money to increase the number of lane miles maintained each year
- develop a three-year rolling plan for maintenance projects

- expand the use of red light cameras
- launch a bike-sharing program

Others are less straightforward. For instance, one action item calls for officials to "investigate recycling options" for debris from street sweeping. Another item asks officials to "consider" variable-priced parking, where meter rates increase based on demand.

Also included in the work plan: more "experimental" speed zones, such as the 20 MPH designation officials got for 70 miles of residential streets in 2011.

Commissioner Steve Novick, who oversees the Transportation Bureau, wrote that he believes the plan will also bring a new level of equity to transportation planning.

"I embrace this plan," he wrote, "as a proactive initiative that puts in writing the bureau's ambitious menu of actions."

Unfortunately for Novick and Treat, the plan doesn't identify one key thing they think could aid their efforts: more money.

Mount Tabor reservoirs: Portland Historic Landmarks Commission approves plan to disconnect reservoirs

*By Andrew Theen
February 09, 2015*

The Portland Historic Landmarks Commission unanimously approved a plan Monday to disconnect Mount Tabor's three historic reservoirs from service by the end of 2015.

More than 130 people packed the meeting downtown, the volunteer commission's fourth lengthy meeting on the plan in the past few months.

Portland officials are following a federal order to cover, treat or disconnect the open-air reservoirs from the city's drinking-water system. The city's decision to disconnect both the Mount Tabor and Washington Park reservoirs is unpopular among dozens of longtime neighbors and advocates who distrust city officials.

In December, Commissioner Amanda Fritz put an official decision on the reservoirs' future on hold amid the ongoing land-use process and related opposition.

The landmarks commission's approval includes a litany of conditions. The Water Bureau can disconnect the reservoirs but must "fully implement" short and long-term maintenance projects included in a 2009 report. The restoration work on the structures, recognized on the National Register of Historic Places, includes removing lights and other unsightly additions.

The reservoirs also must continue to hold water at "historic levels," be maintained and cleaned, and "shall not be partially or fully emptied" for more than 60 days in a calendar year.

The city or residents can appeal Monday's ruling and conditions to the City Council within 14 days.

Stephanie Stewart, land-use board chair for the Mount Tabor Neighborhood Association, said she couldn't say whether the group will appeal. She said the commission made "decent inroads" in addressing long-standing concerns, such as mandating restoration work and requiring that water remain in the reservoirs.

But Stewart said the city's definition of "historic levels" leaves open the possibility that water levels could be as much as 15 percent below normal. That could translate to millions of gallons.

Floy Jones, a longtime opponent of taking the reservoirs offline, echoed Stewart's comments. She said her group, Friends of the Reservoirs, hadn't decided whether to appeal.

Commission member Harris Matarazzo was the most vocal supporter of neighborhood activists at Monday's meeting. "Look at this room. There's a lack of trust," he said, urging the commission to be more specific in its requirements.

The Water Bureau could also appeal the ruling. David Shaff, bureau administrator, issued the following statement:

"The Water Bureau is committed to being a responsible steward of the environment and of the City's drinking water infrastructure. We appreciate the Historic Landmark Commission's thorough and thoughtful analysis of our proposal. At this point, we will wait to receive the written decision."

The Portland Tribune

Hales seeks balance on density dilemma

*By Jim Redden
February 10, 2015*

Mayor Charlie Hales' promise to preserve the character of existing neighborhoods has cheered activists trying to slow the increase in residential demolition and infill projects.

Hales made the vow during his State of the City speech on Jan. 30. Speaking to the Portland City Club, Hales said he will propose restrictions on the size of replacement houses, including mandating setbacks from the street and adjacent houses.

Those praising the announcement include Al Ellis, co-founder of United Neighborhoods for Reform, a grassroots organization fighting the increasing number of demolition and infill projects.

"UNR couldn't be more delighted with the mayor's position on this issue and hope to work closely with the council in formulating the new policies and getting them implemented as soon as is practically possible," Ellis says.

But Hales' promise has puzzled some home builders who say city officials are planning on density increases in residential neighborhoods to help accommodate projected growth during the next 25 years. The city is predicting 123,000 additional households by 2035. The draft Comprehensive Plan update currently being considered calls for 20 percent of them to be built in residential neighborhoods — a total of 24,600 additional households in residential neighborhoods over the next 20 years.

"The city is being disingenuous if it suggests there won't be growth in existing residential neighborhoods," says Jeff Fish, owner of Fish Construction, which has built many infill houses in Portland over the years.

More reactions to come

Hales' promise and its implications will likely be discussed at two high-profile forums this month.

The first is a Feb. 12 City Council hearing on a proposal from the Bureau of Development Services to change its policies regarding residential demolitions. The hearing was continued from Dec. 17 because time ran out before everyone could testify.

The original proposal was crafted by the Development Review Advisory Committee, an appointed panel that assists BDS, the city agency that issues demolition, remodeling and construction permits. DRAC is composed primarily of developers with some neighborhood representatives and city employees from related agencies.

At the first hearing, many witnesses — including UNR members — objected to part of the proposal that called for ending an existing 120-day demolition delay automatically granted to neighborhood associations that request them. Two weeks ago, DRAC and UNR representatives met and worked out a compromise proposal that the council will consider Thursday. It keeps the existing 35-day delay on all demolitions, allows anyone to request an additional 60-day extension for any house of significance to a neighborhood, allows the \$1,318 extension application fee to be waived for neighborhood associations, and provides for fundraising plans to be developed during the extension.

Ellis praises the subcommittee for being willing to compromise.

The second forum is a citywide Community Summit titled "In It Together" sponsored by the Office of Neighborhood Involvement on Feb. 28. (See info box). Three UNR members are scheduled to lead a workshop titled "Demolition and Development — How Neighborhood Grassroots Organizations Can Impact Public Policy." It will cover such issues as the demolition of viable affordable houses and their replacement with more expensive ones. It is scheduled to begin at 10:10 a.m.

Plan calls for more density

Portland is in the middle of a multiyear process to determine where and how the city will grow during the next 20 years. State land-use planning laws require the Comprehensive Plan that governs growth to be updated by the end of this year. It is intended to determine where the 123,000 new households expected by 2035 will be located.

The draft now being considered by the Planning and Sustainability Commission envisions 30 percent of the new households in the central city and 50 percent in urban centers and along major transportation corridors — 80 percent of the total. The draft also calls for 80 percent of new housing units to be apartments and condominium.

At first glance, that would seem to minimize the density increases in residential neighborhoods. But 20 percent of new households is still a large number — 24,600 during the next two decades. Because Portland's neighborhoods are already so well developed, there is not enough vacant land to accommodate so many. That means many existing houses will have to be demolished and replaced with one or more new housing units over the next two decades.

Fish says the city will not be able to meet its housing goals if Hales reduces incentives for infill projects, including building larger homes and multiple houses on the same lot.

"Land prices are already so high in Portland that larger houses need to be built to justify the cost. But if you hold land prices down by limiting development options, homeowners who have been counting on making money when they sell their houses will be hurt," Fish says.

Fritz proposes ban on smoking in parks

*By Shasta Kearns Moore
February 10, 2015*

Should smoking be prohibited in all of Portland's parks?

That's what city Commissioner Amanda Fritz will propose at the city council meeting on Wednesday, when a hearing is scheduled on the issue.

As the commissioner in charge of Portland Parks & Recreation, Fritz says the hodgepodge of regulations restricting tobacco use are confusing. There is currently a smoking ban in select Portland parks — Director Park, Pioneer Courthouse Square and the Portland State University side of the South Park Blocks — and 25 feet around any play structure, picnic table or designated children's area.

"Expanding PP&R's existing tobacco-free policy across the entire system sends a consistent message," Fritz said in a news release. "It helps to create healthy and safe environments within all of Portland Parks & Recreation — especially for children and youth. This measure aligns with PP&R's focus of 'Healthy Parks, Healthy Portland.'"

The proposed new ban also would include marijuana, which Oregon voters legalized last November.

If passed by the council Feb. 18, the new regulation would take effect July 1, which is also when recreational marijuana will become legal.

Violators in the first five months of the new policy would be educated about the ban, though patrons who refuse to comply could be issued a park exclusion. After the grace period, a violation would be considered a misdemeanor.

The policy would extend to PP&R events, but a limited exception is carved out for golf tournaments.

The ban would include bidis, cigarettes, cigarillos, cigars, clove cigarettes, e-cigarettes, nicotine vaporizers, nicotine liquids, hookahs, kreteks, pipes, chew, snuff, smokeless tobacco and marijuana.

The state Parks and Recreation Department dropped a plan last November to ban smoking on its 362 miles of public beaches. The agency has banned smoking in most parts of state parks, picnic areas and trails. More than 60 other cities and counties in Oregon have smoke-free parks.

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Planners to discuss possible mixed-use zoning tweaks

By Inka Bajandas

February 9, 2015

Portland planners this month will host two public meetings to share potential revisions to city mixed-use zoning designations, development and design standards.

The meetings, part of the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability's Mixed Use Zones Project, will take place on Feb. 25 from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. and Feb. 26 from 7:30 to 10 a.m. at 1900 S.W. Fourth Ave. in Room 2500. Each session will begin as an informal open house, and follow with a presentation by city staffers. On Feb. 25, the presentation will start at 6:30 p.m.; on Feb. 26 it will start at 8 a.m.

The Mixed Use Zones Project stems from efforts to update the city's comprehensive plan and encourage development of mixed-use centers for more walkable urban neighborhoods. Currently, the city uses commercial and central employment zones that were created in the 1990s, when car-centric developments and lower-density commercial projects were more common.

In a briefing on the project last week, senior planner Barry Manning told the Portland Design Commission that a preliminary zoning concept was released last fall and that city staffers are in the process of developing the new codes. Plans call for consolidating the current nine zones that relate to mixed-use buildings down to four zones catered to the size of the development, he said.

Planners have also used community feedback to craft potential revisions to development and design standards along the city's commercial corridors, Manning said. Standards could relate to building articulation and massing, and require windows on a certain percentage of the ground-floor space.