

Discrimination ban on Section 8 to become law

BY JAKE THOMAS
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For people who use a federal housing voucher subsidy to rent an apartment, one phrase has been a constant barrier: "No Section 8."

Under Oregon law, and despite a whole list of equal rights protections for renters, landlords could legally bar anyone who received Section 8 housing assistance from consideration at tenants.

This session's passage of HB 2639 changes all that. Starting in July 2014, landlords will no longer be able to discriminate against Section 8, or Housing Choice voucher holders.

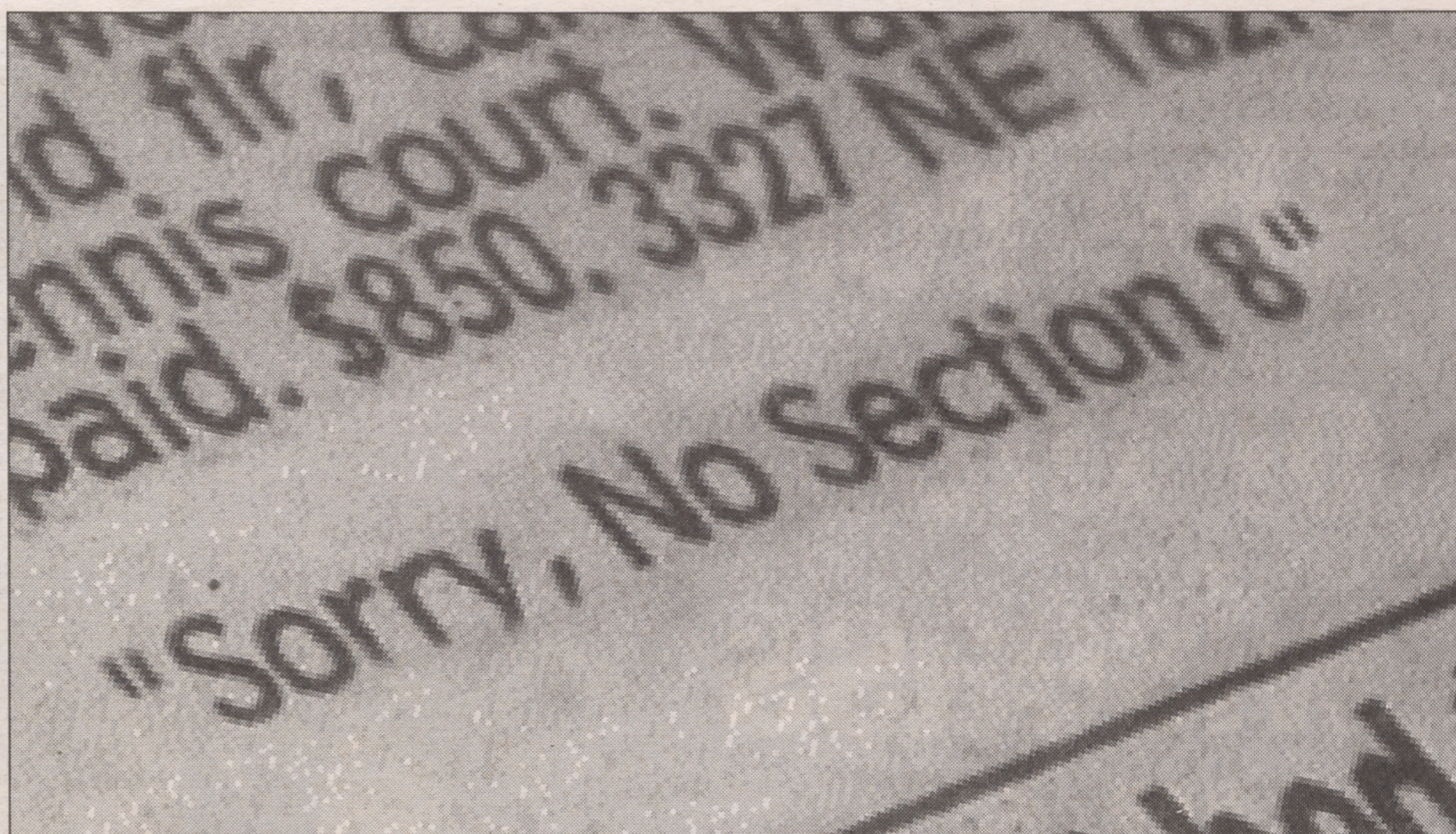
"It will open up a lot of desirable, affordable apartments in places in the city where it has been off limits," says Portland City Commissioner Nick Fish, who campaigned for the measure. "To landlords, it says is you have to treat a voucher holder the same as any other prospective tenant. It takes the stigma out and gives the voucher holder equal standing."

Congress established the Housing Choice program in 1937 to subsidize the rent of the very poor, elderly and disabled. In order to be eligible for the program, participants must make 50 percent or less than the median family income, less than \$34,000 for a family of four in the Portland area.

Despite guaranteed rent, some landlords are reluctant to take Section 8 tenants because they worry they will be bad tenants and find the program burdensome. And in a saturated rental market, property owners and landlords could afford to turn away low-income renters.

"This is probably the tightest rental market in Portland in the last three decades," says Steve Rudman, the executive director of Home Forward. Home Forward is the local housing authority that administers the Housing Choice program for Multnomah County.

There are 8,400 households throughout Multnomah County that use the program,



and it contributes over \$50 million in rents annually. When Home Forward opened up its waiting list for Housing Choice vouchers in November last year for 10 days it received 21,000 applications for 3,000 spots, far outstripping Home Forward's ability to meet demand.

Voucher holders have an initial 60 days, with the possibility of getting extensions, to find a landlord who will accept them. However, in a tight rental market many voucher holders end up losing their voucher and their chance of getting housing that falls in their budget—sometimes after years of waiting to get into the program.

The recently passed bill seeks to change that by barring landlords from turning down tenants solely because they hold a voucher. It also establishes a statewide fund to help landlords recoup lost rent or expenses from damages to their property caused by voucher holders. Additionally, it expedites federal inspection requirements that some landlords have found burdensome.

Landlords, under the bill, can still reject a tenant because of a poor rental history. These provisions, according to Rudman, were key to getting landlords to drop opposition to the legislation.

Currently, roughly 2,500 landlords participate in the program in Multnomah County, says Rudman. While it's unclear how many more landlords might participate in the program as a result of the legislation, Rudman says he expects that number to rise because there are plenty of good tenants

who hold vouchers and would pass background checks for rentals but might be currently turned down by landlords reluctant to participate in the program.

"My sense is that if some tenants go through the normal screening process, there will be some that will pass that screening process," he says.

This isn't the first time this issue has caught the attention of local elected and housing officials. In 2008, in response to a significant number of voucher holders unable to find housing before their voucher expired, Home Forward (then the Housing Authority of Portland) and then-Housing Commissioner Nick Fish convened a task force to address the problem. The task force helped raise the acceptance rate for vouchers from 75 to 90 percent, in part, by establishing a fund to help landlords recover costs from damages or unpaid rent from Section 8 tenants and by making the inspection process easier. Some of these approaches were incorporated into the recently passed bill.

This isn't the first time the legislature has looked at this issue, says Rudman, and it was successful this time around because it had a powerful backer: House Speaker Tina Kotek, who worked early on to broker compromises between real estate interests and housing advocates.

However, the bill almost didn't clear a critical final hurdle in the waning days of the legislative session. The Senate narrowly voted it down on the first attempt. In a second vote, the bill passed, 16-13.

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