

Politically Tinged Housing Case is Settled

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By Jeff Shields

The complaint against a GOP donor - and a GOP commissioner's response - became election issues.

An investigation into a housing discrimination complaint against a major Republican campaign contributor has ended in a settlement, the Fair Housing Council of Montgomery County has announced.

The complaint against North Crossing Apartments stirred up last year's county commissioners race when the two Democratic candidates accused Republican Commissioner James Matthews of quashing the investigation against his friend, Harold Rosen, owner of the apartments.

The Fair Housing Council had accused North Crossing of telling women with children that certain apartments were unavailable when they in fact were.

As part of the settlement, North Crossing agreed to conduct fair-housing training for its staff for three years, the Fair Housing Council's executive director, Elizabeth Albert, wrote in a news release.

The apartments will also post fair-housing flyers and "assure that all prospective tenants are informed of all types of available units at the complex," Albert said.

The news release added that the Fair Housing Council would hold a countywide public service campaign to educate people about "this common type of housing discrimination."

The remainder of the settlement is confidential. Albert would not say whether a fine was involved. Rosen also declined to comment.

Matthews, now chairman of the Board of Commissioners, had asked for an audit of the Fair Housing Council last year after Rosen told him about the complaint, putting a temporary halt to the investigation.

Matthews, a landlord himself, said organizations such as the Fair Housing Council did too little to educate landlords about obscure laws and instead concentrated on punishing them for mistakes.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development acknowledges that many landlords are unaware of some housing laws.

But Democratic Commissioner Ruth Damsker accused Matthews of interfering in the investigation on behalf of Rosen, who gave \$10,000 to his successful campaign. The resulting bitterness put a chill on the relationship between Damsker and Matthews.

Matthews said yesterday that he did not plan to withdraw county funding for the Fair Housing Council, because the council threatened to sue him if he did. But he said he would not increase its budget.

"They'll never see another dime above that which we're funding them now as long as I'm in office," he said.

Contact staff writer Jeff Shields at 610-313-8173 or jshields@phillynews.com.