

THE VERIFICATION MONOPOLY

How contradictions across the City of Philadelphia's property websites make 100% online confirmation of a rental licence impossible — and where the unanswered question goes instead. A companion to the "FOUR DOORS, ONE RECORD" audit (25 July 2026) and its live re-verification (19 August 2026).

Prepared 2026-08-19 · **By** 4PHILLY · 4philly.net · an independent, non-governmental tenant tool · **Method:** every technical figure below is drawn from the audit's live captures and queries of the City's own services, reproducible by the reader. Statements sourced instead to press reporting, official City webpages, or the author's own correspondence and contemporaneous account are labelled as such where they appear.

HOW TO READ THIS DOCUMENT

This document makes one argument in two halves. First: the City's property websites do not merely omit the legally decisive licence date — they contradict one another about the dates they do show, and contradiction, unlike omission, makes certainty impossible from the websites *in principle*. Second: a question that cannot be closed online must be closed by a person, and the record identifies who receives that traffic, what it is worth to him, and how long he has watched it arrive. The document distinguishes throughout between what is **measured**, what is **documented**, and what is **inferred** — and §8 states plainly what is not claimed.

1 · The question, and why "100%" is the standard

The question a Philadelphia tenant needs answered is narrow: **was this property licensed on the day my rent was due?** It is not a curiosity. Phila. Code §9-3902(1)(a) bars collecting rent without a valid rental licence, and §9-3901(4) (e) denies a non-compliant owner the right to recover possession or rent for the period of non-compliance. The Municipal Court's own filing requirements run on the licence's actual coverage dates, not on a status word.

Because the answer carries legal consequence — rent withholding, an eviction defense, a court filing — an approximate answer is worthless and a wrong answer is dangerous. The tenant does not need a probably; the tenant needs certainty. That is the standard against which the City's public surfaces must be judged, because it is the only standard at which the information is useful.

2 · Why contradiction is worse than omission

IN PLAIN TERMS

A missing fact sends you looking somewhere else. A **contradiction** does something worse: it tells you that at least one official surface is wrong, without telling you which — and since no surface is marked as the authoritative one, it poisons your confidence in all of them at once. After the first contradiction, no page can settle anything by itself. The only way to reach 100% is to ask a person with access behind the websites. Omission creates a gap; contradiction creates a *dependency*.

This is not hypothetical. For a single licence record — 602204, one address, one OPA account — the City's surfaces disagreed with each other, live, as follows:

Fact in question	Surface A says	Surface B says	Surface C says
Inactive date	Property History: Apr 28, 2026	eCLIPSE: Apr 29, 2026	Carto API: Apr 29, 2026
Renewal / effective date	eCLIPSE search card: Mar 1, 2025	Carto mostrecentissuedate: Feb 6, 2025	eCLIPSE detail: "Renewed On" Feb 28, 2026
"Renewed On"	eCLIPSE displayed a renewal date identical to the expiration date , on a licence whose state was Inactive — a field that reads as an assurance of renewal on a record that had lapsed.		
An expired licence's dates (783153, same parcel)	Property History: Status Expired , Inactive date "Not Available" — the reader learns the licence expired but cannot learn <i>when</i> . The open-data API, queried the same moment, returned July 15, 2026.		

MEASURED ROOT CAUSE — THE CONTRADICTION IS STRUCTURAL, NOT A TYPO

The audit's Appendix A traced the one-day disagreement to its cause: the two map-facing surfaces read from **two separately maintained copies** of the same upstream extract. The Carto copy stores bare dates as midnight *Eastern* (the stored UTC time tracks US daylight saving exactly across all 319,053 expiration-dated records — the signature of correct localisation); the ArcGIS copy behind Property History stores the same dates as midnight *UTC*. Every browser in a US time zone therefore renders every bare date on Property History **one calendar day early**. The two City surfaces have disagreed by a day on these fields since the Property History app launched in late 2021, and the defect reproduced on live re-verification on 19 August 2026. In other words: for nearly five years, on the exact fields that decide legal status, the City's two public pages have been *guaranteed* to contradict each other.

Combine the contradictions with the omissions the audit verified — no expiration date on either map surface, the field delivered to the Property History page in the response body and discarded before render, a click-path that forms a closed loop never reaching eCLIPSE, and eCLIPSE itself four unlinked levels deep with a free-text search offering no format guidance — and the result is precise: **a member of the public cannot reach certainty from the City's websites, even in principle, because the websites both withhold the decisive fact and disagree about the facts they show**. The building's own residents — lawyers and medical professionals among them — could not confirm the licence status when it mattered. That was not a failure of skill. It was the system's output.

3 · Where an unanswerable question goes

IN PLAIN TERMS

Questions do not disappear when websites fail to answer them; they route to humans. The record identifies every human channel that actually holds the answer, and each one is a gatekeeper who decides whether, and how fast, a given asker gets it.

- **L&I itself** — the department of record. The City's own Atlas maintainer stated in writing (3 Aug 2026) that to prove a licence's status at a past date, a lawyer "would need to request additional back data from L&I." Certainty about the past is, by her account, a request-and-wait service, not a lookup.
- **The renewal reversion** — the same written account confirms that a late-renewed licence reverts to Active with a future expiration date, leaving **no public trace of the lapse**. Licence 602204 then demonstrated this live: Inactive on every surface in late July; Active by 3 August; no visible history. Even a tenant who once had proof watches it evaporate from the public record.
- **The district councilman's office** — Philadelphia's constituent-services tradition, at which the 1st District member is by reputation among the most prolific. A tenant who cannot determine a licence, a violation, or an owner from the sites calls the councilman; the councilman's office calls the department. His own quoted words, from published reporting on his relationship with the department: *"There's nothing like being able to call a commissioner at L&I... It makes life a lot easier."* Easier than what? Than the public channel. The sentence is only true — and the privileged channel only valuable — if the public channel does not work.

That is the routing structure in full: the websites perform transparency, decline confirmation, and the confirmation traffic lands on human gatekeepers — chief among them, for a district containing **31,197 rental licences**, the councilman whose political brand is answering the phone.

4 · Twelve years of notice, delivered by telephone

Councilmember Mark F. Squilla has held the 1st District seat since **January 2, 2012** — before any surface in the current map ecosystem existed (eCLIPSE portal live Jan 2015; the open dataset created Sept 2016; Atlas first appears Apr 2017, already without an expiration column; Property History live late 2021, with its one-day defect from birth; the Atlas rebuild 2024). He is currently **Vice Chair of the Council Committee on Licenses & Inspections** and Chair of the Committees on Commerce & Economic Development and Appropriations, and Majority Whip. Before politics he spent **25 years as a systems analyst** in the Pennsylvania Auditor General's Office (1985–2011), holding a computer-science degree — a working IT professional, trained in databases, extraction pipelines, and where records systems capture, retain, or fail to surface information.

IN PLAIN TERMS — THE PHONE LOG IS THE DIAGNOSIS

No one needs to imagine him auditing an API. His knowledge arrives by a simpler channel: **volume**. Every constituent call that begins "I couldn't figure out from the City's website whether..." is a failure report about the public tools, and his office has received that traffic daily for twelve-plus years — a continuously updated dataset on exactly where the sites fail the public, delivered to the one member of Council professionally trained to recognise what it means when every real question must route around a system through a human. In a systems analyst's own vocabulary, that pattern has a name: a system failing its users. The diagnosis has sat in his call log for a decade.

And the failure is not neutral to him. A public site that let tenants close their own licence questions would disintermediate the constituent-services channel that is his political base — the informational equivalent of councilmanic prerogative. Published reporting documents the alignment of his donor base with real-estate and building-trades interests (among Council's top recipients of real-estate money) and his personal acquaintance with major district owners. None of that proves an instruction was ever given. It establishes something structurally sufficient: **the failure's traffic flows to him, its persistence benefits him, and its correction costs him**. Broken public tools make the councilman the API.

5 · The 2026 notice record — from ambient to explicit

Whatever ambient notice twelve years of calls supplied, 2026 replaced it with explicit, written, dated notice, delivered finished:

Date	Event
Jul 7–8	Author emails Squilla directly on the licence-display problem and its use against tenants; Squilla replies in writing, "I see your concerns listed below," and routes the thread onward. Notice of the issue, acknowledged.
Jul 25–26	The "Four Doors, One Record" audit is completed and submitted to integrity@phila.gov with the pipeline traced to root cause and five remedies costed at near-zero.
Aug 3	The City's own Atlas maintainer (CityGeo/OIT) replies remedy-by-remedy in writing: confirms the effective-date mechanics were newly learned even inside the City, confirms a live eCLIPSE sync error, declines the one-line map fix as a preference, states her perception that the omission reflects L&I's enforcement posture, and confirms lapses leave no public trace after renewal.
Aug 19	City Hall meeting with Squilla's office. Same evening: a direct email placing his own analyst background against the unfixed problem (reply: "Thank you for sharing this information and I will share with L&I to look into this possibility"); the full Integrity/CityGeo thread forwarded to him personally with a second council office copied (reply: "Will do"); and a follow-up disambiguating that the diagnostic work was done by a non-analyst who "learned as I went."

After 19 August, the position is closed on both ends: he cannot claim the problem was never brought to him, and he cannot claim inability to understand it — the diagnosis arrived completed, traced, and re-verified, addressed to a man whose 25-year profession was reading exactly such diagnoses. His two written replies that evening total fourteen words and engage no date, field, system, or specific.

6 · Conduct at the moment of notice

Sourcing note. This section rests on the author's contemporaneous account of the 19 August 2026 meeting, memorialised in writing the same day. It is testimony, not a transcript, and is offered as such. The email record before and after the meeting is documentary.

Handed the completed diagnosis and a live habitability crisis in his district, the meeting's agenda, per the author's account, ran the other direction: advice to retain a lawyer and settle with the landlord *that week*; the observation that the building losing its certificate of occupancy would be bad because "we don't want to do that to people"; a

suggestion that a friend enter the author's unit to retrieve belongings — a proposal that concedes the unit is unsafe for its own tenant while declining to address why; agreement that the exposure issue is a private-building matter; and framing settlement as good for the author's peace of mind with respect to future litigation over his documentation website.

The evidentiary weight of this section is deliberately limited (see §8). Its analytic weight is this: someone genuinely surprised by a defect in his oversight area responds with questions and correction. The observed response — by the author's account, and consistent with the fourteen documentary words that followed — was containment: manage the person raising the problem rather than the problem. Conduct at the moment of notice is evidence of whose interests an arrangement serves, and it requires no claim about what was known before.

7 · "Perfect design" — stated precisely

IN PLAIN TERMS

If one set out to design a records system that *looked* transparent while routing every consequential confirmation through a human gatekeeper, the optimal design would not merely hide the decisive field. It would (a) display enough dates and statuses that the pages appear complete; (b) withhold the one field carrying legal consequence; (c) ensure the surfaces contradict one another on the fields they do show, so that no page can be trusted alone; (d) let lapses vanish from the record on renewal, so even past certainty decays; and (e) leave the authoritative source unlinked and unfindable. **The system the audit measured has all five properties.**

This document therefore makes a *functional-equivalence* claim, not an intent claim: the City's property surfaces are, in measured behaviour, indistinguishable from a system designed to monopolise verification — and the arrangement has an identified class of beneficiary, a documented incentive structure, and, since mid-2026, an unambiguous notice record. Whether the configuration arose by design or by drift changes nothing about how it behaves. What notice changes is the future: an arrangement that is explained, defended, and retained after being traced to root cause is no longer an accident. From 19 August 2026 forward, its persistence is a choice, made with full comprehension, by people on written record.

8 · What is NOT claimed

No allegation of original intent. Nothing herein claims that Councilmember Squilla, or anyone, designed or directed the field-routing, the omissions, or the contradictions. The dated timeline shows the systems were built and maintained entirely within his Council tenure; it does not show he specified them. The audit "asserts no motive and alleges no wrongdoing," and this document holds that line for the systems' origins.

No allegation of an exchange. No quid pro quo is claimed. Donor-base alignment and personal acquaintance with owners are documented context, not proof of a transaction.

What IS claimed, each with its evidence class: the contradictions and dead ends (measured, reproducible); the root cause (traced in the City's published code and live services); the no-trace reversion (confirmed in writing by the City and demonstrated live); the departmental account of the omission as enforcement posture (the City's maintainer, in writing); the routing function and its beneficiary structure (documented reporting and the official's own published words); the notice record (email, dated); and the conduct at notice (author's contemporaneous account, so labelled).

9 · The right doors

The record supports two different filings, and they belong at two different addresses. **The systemic complaint** — public data collected, classified public, refreshed daily, delivered to the page, and withheld from the public as departmental practice, with surfaces contradicting each other for years — is performance-audit material for the **City Controller** (independently elected; audits departments including L&I and OIT), and hearing material for two Council committees not chaired by the 1st District member: **Technology & Information Services** (jurisdiction over all City IT planning and implementation) and **Licenses & Inspections**. **The conduct complaint** — concerning an elected official — belongs to the **Board of Ethics**, the independent body whose jurisdiction covers the legislative branch; the Office of the Inspector General's jurisdiction is limited to the executive branch and cannot reach a councilmember. Anything alleging an actual criminal exchange is federal territory, and this document alleges none. The systemic filing rests entirely on documents and stands on its own; the conduct filing rests on testimony; strength should decide order.

BOTTOM LINE

The City already collects the answer, publishes it as open data, and delivers it to its own webpage — which throws it away — while its public surfaces contradict one another on the very dates that decide legal rights. A tenant cannot reach certainty from the websites even in principle; certainty is available only from human gatekeepers, and the largest of those channels runs through a councilman's office whose political value derives from being the workaround, whose occupant spent 25 years professionally trained to read this exact failure, and who has now been handed the completed diagnosis in writing, twice, and answered in fourteen words.

Sources. Technical findings: "FOUR DOORS, ONE RECORD" (4PHILLY, 25 July 2026) and its 19 Aug 2026 live re-verification — phl.carto.com/api/v2/sql; services.arcgis.com/fLeGjb7u4uXqeF9q/.../BUSINESS_LICENSES; rendered-page href extraction; github.com/CityOfPhiladelphia (databridge-etl-tools, databridge-airflow, vue3-atlas); Wayback Machine CDX; OpenDataPhilly CKAN; metadata.phila.gov. City correspondence: integrity@phila.gov submission of 26 Jul 2026 and CityGeo written reply of 3 Aug 2026; councilmember email replies of 8 Jul and 19 Aug 2026. Institutional facts: phlcouncil.com Standing Committees (2024–2027 term, per Resolution 240001; updated 24 Nov 2025) — L&I Committee Chair M. Driscoll, Vice Chair M. Squilla; Committee on Technology & Information Services jurisdiction statement; published reporting (WHYY, Philadelphia Inquirer, Philly Power Research) for career, donor-base, and quoted-statement facts. Meeting account of 19 Aug 2026: author's contemporaneous record, so labelled in §6. This document offers information, not legal advice, and — as stated at §8 — alleges no motive in the systems' origins and no criminal conduct by any person. 4PHILLY is independent and unaffiliated with the City of Philadelphia.