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Social Engineering in Suburbia

Federal regulators try to integrate counties by housing fiat.

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You'd think that federal housing officials these days would focus on repairing a housing market that continues to retard economic growth. Yet the Department of Housing and Urban Development is preoccupied with the precise racial and ethnic make-up of American neighborhoods, such as Westchester County north of New York City.

In 2009 Westchester's then-county executive, Democrat Andrew Spano, reached a settlement with HUD that ended a lawsuit brought by a liberal activist group. The suit alleged that Westchester had accepted federal grants while making false claims about "affordable housing" in the county. Never mind that prior to Team Obama's strong-arming, HUD officials in Republican and Democratic Administrations had praised Westchester's housing practices. Mr. Spano said he agreed to the deal instead of going to trial because he didn't want to put federal funds for the county at risk.

Westchester officials admitted no wrongdoing, but the county did agree to spend \$50 million on 750 new subsidized housing units—630 of which must be constructed in

enclaves that are less than 3% black and 7% Hispanic—and to market them to minorities. According to the current Westchester executive, Republican Rob Astorino, the county is well along in meeting those goals, but the Obama Administration won't take yes for an answer.

"HUD is trying to expand the terms of the settlement from a straightforward stipulation to build housing into an open-ended utopian integration order," Mr. Astorino says. The Administration wants the county to say that its housing patterns stem from discriminatory practices, though there's no evidence to support the claim. "All of the objective studies that have been done show that housing patterns in Westchester are driven by economics," says Mr. Astorino.

Even the activist group that filed the original lawsuit couldn't show any pattern of discrimination, which is why it filed a false claims suit instead. According to the 2010 Census, Westchester is the fourth most racially diverse county in the state, trailing only Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx, and tying Manhattan.

That's not good enough for HUD. Even as more blacks and Hispanics enter the middle-class and migrate to suburbia, liberals fret over their neighborhood preferences. Yet there is a significant body of research detailing how and why ethnic and racial groups often cluster in separate residential areas. Studies have shown that most blacks prefer to live where a majority of the residents are also black. This may horrify HUD officials, but racial and ethnic minorities often prefer to live where they have family ties and social networks.

The Obama Administration acknowledges that its demands on Westchester—which include rezoning—fall outside of the settlement, but the White House is determined to make an example of the county. "We're clearly messaging other jurisdictions across the country that there has been a significant change in the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and we're going to ask them to pursue similar goals as well," said Rob Sims, a deputy secretary at HUD at the time of the settlement.

The good news is that Mr. Astorino is fighting back, and the case could end up back in court, which could spare communities nationwide a lot of grief. Westchester isn't the Jim Crow South, and government

attempts to shoehorn people into communities where they otherwise can't afford to live often result in needless racial tensions and divided communities. The problem is not Westchester's "affordable

housing" policies. The problem is a government mentality that wants to determine where people should live.