

## HUD's warped war on Westchester: Our county is already diverse *Washington throws its federal weight around White Plains*

BY ROBERT ASTORINO / NEW YORK DAILY NEWS  
WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 2011



CHIP SOMODEVILLA/GETTY IMAGES

President Obama appeared with (left to right) then-economic advisor Austan Goolsbee, Housing and Urban Development Secretary Shaun Donovan, Commerce Secretary Gary Locke and Vice President Joe Biden in September 2010.

Only 15% of Americans trust the federal government to do the right thing most of the time, according to a recent poll.

Here's one reason why. Common sense tells us you can't manage

what you can't measure. Yet the [Obama administration](#) is constantly trying to manage without measuring costs or consequences.

A case in point is a fight that the federal Housing and Urban

Development Department is waging against Westchester County, where I am county executive. In 2009, my predecessor signed a consent decree with the federal government to settle allegations that Westchester made

false claims in connection with federal funds it received for affordable housing. The settlement called for the county to build at least 750 units of affordable housing in 31 so-called eligible or mostly white communities within seven years or face severe fines.

Two years later, the federal government, not content simply to see the housing built, is trying to use the settlement as a hammer to dismantle local zoning — oblivious to common sense, the rule of law and the bill to taxpayers.

I opposed the settlement from the outset, but since entering office last year, I've worked to comply with it. With 206 housing units already approved by the federal monitor, the county is a year ahead of schedule.

HUD is not satisfied. It views the settlement as an integration order to be used as a model for the entire country, and it is playing hardball to make its point. The agency is currently withholding \$7 million in funding from Westchester — money designated, ironically enough, to implement the settlement — because the county has failed to show how its plans “will affirmatively further fair housing.”

No one knows how to translate that last bit, including HUD. [Assistant Secretary John Trasviña](#) has promised to provide “greater clarity over what affirmatively furthering actually means” next year. In the meantime, top-down, Washington-driven social engineering marches on in search of problems that exist only in the minds of bureaucrats.

Here are the facts. Westchester already is the fourth most diverse county in New York (tied with Manhattan and behind Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx). If Westchester were a state, it would be the seventh most diverse in terms of Hispanic representation and the 14th in terms of African-American representation.

So what is the social ill that HUD would have us solve? HUD calls it de facto segregation, complaining that not enough African-Americans and Hispanics live on every block or neighborhood throughout the county.

That complaint, it turns out, is against local zoning. The hit list includes limits on multifamily housing, townhouse development, bedrooms per unit, minimum lot size and even sewers. In HUD's mind, these add up to a set of restrictions that discriminate on the basis of race.

HUD now wants half of the 750 units required under the settlement to have three bedrooms — a brand-new requirement it concedes is outside of the agreement. Such an idea would double the cost of compliance at a time when Westchester, which already has the highest property taxes in the nation, is facing service cuts and hundreds of layoffs.

The federal government's social engineering even goes so far as to add a page to [Garrison Keillor's](#) “A Prairie Home Companion,” suggesting all the housing should be near “above-average schools.” Had it bothered to check, HUD would have found that Westchester's worst-performing high school when it comes to the

most fundamental academic performance metric, graduation rates, is above average on a statewide basis.

Where does it end? Is HUD going to call for the breakup of Vermont and Maine because they are 95% white? What about Chinatown or other predominantly ethnic city neighborhoods?

In Westchester, anyone can live anywhere they like. Where people live depends on the home they can afford. That's not discrimination. That's economics.

The 2010 U.S. census provides proof Westchester is a welcoming community. As a result of natural market forces, the African-American and Hispanic populations of the 31 mostly white communities in the settlement increased 56% over the past decade.

Integration is happening naturally. Yet if all 750 of the housing units required by this settlement were evenly distributed among the 31 designated communities and filled solely with African-Americans and Hispanics, their representation would increase by only 5% — at a projected cost approaching \$100 million.

Westchester is a real place. It's struggling with real problems. More attention to these real problems and less time spent on social engineering would help get people believing in the federal government again.

*Astorino is Westchester's county executive.*