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LETTERS | SEPTEMBER 28, 2011

Westchester Is Not at All a Victim of Federal Bullying

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Regarding your editorial "Social Engineering in Suburbia" (Sept. 19): When it applied for Community Development Block Grant funding from the federal government, Westchester County certified that it would administer the funds in compliance with the Fair Housing Act and in a manner that would not further residential segregation. The settlement committed the county to live up to that existing obligation. The mandates of the Fair Housing Act are not "social engineering," but instead prohibit using federal dollars to exacerbate existing residential segregation. That prohibition is not just constitutionally required, it is imperative to prevent the disparities that segregation causes. Research documents the real, tangible negative impacts that segregation has on families: Blacks who live in highly segregated places are more likely to experience unemployment, have poorer educational outcomes and have poorer health outcomes than black households living in less segregated places.

Despite the diversity described by the author, Westchester is a segregated county. Neighborhoods in inner-ring suburbs just north of the Bronx are over 80% black and Hispanic, while communities in a significant portion of the county are less than 3% black and 7% Hispanic. Creating 750 new homes in predominantly white suburbs will not reverse those patterns. But the low- and moderate-income households (black, white, Hispanic or other races and ethnicities) who move into this new housing will gain access to significant economic and educational opportunities.

Eighty-six percent of the Westchester neighborhoods where new housing could be built under the settlement offer opportunities above the county median, according to an Opportunity Index developed by NYU's Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy in partnership with the Urban Institute. This index, which ranks neighborhoods according to the social and economic opportunities they provide, based on education, crime, jobs and environmental quality, finds that only 28% of ineligible tracts—where most low-income housing already exists—offer opportunities above the county median.

Vicki Been

Ingrid Gould Ellen

NYU Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy

New York

Peer-reviewed research shows that African-Americans and Latinos would prefer to live in integrated communities with good schools, safe streets, reliable transportation and access to jobs that will let them support their families. That often means living in communities where they are numerical minorities. Ironically, it is more often whites who express a desire to "live among their own." As an individual choice such decisions may be understandable, but as an expression of municipal policy (imposed by zoning, land use and building codes that may be constructed to perpetuate segregation) it is illegal.

Westchester chose to apply for and accept tens of millions of dollars of federal money knowing that it was required to dismantle racial segregation as a precondition of getting the money. A federal judge found that every one of the county's certifications of compliance was false.

Michael Allen

Washington

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