

# NATIONAL REVIEW

## Two Cheers for Ben Carson

Robert Verbruggen

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Over on the homepage, the Cato Institute's Michael Tanner praises the latest initiative from Housing and Urban Development secretary Ben Carson. As Tanner describes it, Carson “has let it be known that he intends to link federal housing funds to local officials’ willingness to reduce regulations that restrict affordable housing. He wants to ensure that if mayors and governors continue to pander to wealthy special interests by enacting barriers to housing construction, Washington will no longer bail them out.” Put differently, Carson has joined the bipartisan “YIMBY” movement — meaning “yes in my backyard,” as opposed to “not in my backyard.”

That movement is correct on the policy merits. As I wrote in a lengthy piece about segregation earlier this year, overly aggressive zoning and land-use regulations do immense damage to the economy and also make it more difficult to integrate neighborhoods, both economically and racially. Tanner points out that these regulations have been explicitly racist in the past, though now they mainly take the form of race-neutral restrictions that make it hard to build cheaper forms of housing (and sometimes make it hard to build *any* housing, driving up prices across the board).

Carson’s regulation is also far superior to the Obama-era plan he’s trying to replace, a heavy-handed effort to force metro areas to directly engineer their neighborhoods’ racial balance. Stanley Kurtz called it a “de facto regional annexation of America’s suburbs.”

There are even some conservative arguments for the federal government in particular to push better policies. For one thing, as a political matter, federal subsidies for affordable housing aren’t going anywhere — and it makes little sense to subsidize affordable housing in cities that are deliberately making housing *unaffordable*. Just as we ask welfare recipients to take steps to make themselves self-sufficient, perhaps we might ask federal grant recipients to stop obstructing the purposes of the grants they receive.

But I think any conservative has to hesitate when a policy takes the form of using federal dollars to change state and local policy. Essentially, the national government is taking taxpayers’ money and refusing to give it back unless those taxpayers support the right policies at another level of

government, overriding the key distinctions of American federalism. It's one thing if those policies are unconstitutional; it's another when they're just bad or have a disparate impact on the poor.

Carson's plan could do a lot of good and, again, is a drastic improvement on the plan he's trying to replace. But I wanted to at least tip my hat to the idea that perhaps the federal government shouldn't leverage its taxing and spending powers to overrule the lower levels of government.