HUD secretary Ben Carson wants more cities to ditch single-family zoning

As cities across the U.S. grapple with severe housing shortages that send prices soaring and would-be buyers fleeing, Ben Carson said he'd like to see more cities address the zoning regulations that contribute to the problem.

Carson — who leads the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) — made his comments Tuesday during a visit to Minneapolis, where lawmakers voted last year to ditch single-family zoning, which had previously dominated the city limits. Speaking to reporters, Carson suggested more cities should follow Minneapolis' example, and drew a connection between zoning and homelessness.

Ben Carson | Credit: HUD

"The correlation seems very strong: The more zoning restrictions and regulations, the higher the prices and the more homeless people," Carson said, according to the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*. "So, armed with that knowledge, we have to work with these various places. And I don't think there's anybody that wants to see homelessness and squalor. We just have to start utilizing the facts and utilizing the evidence to create the policies."

Zoning works by regulating what kinds of buildings can be constructed in various parts of a city. Single-family zoning typically bars property owners from erecting more than one dwelling on a single parcel.

While in Minneapolis, Carson also reportedly stressed the importance of educating people about "NIMBYism," which stands for "not in my back yard." The concept refers to the practice of property owners resisting new development and is widely seen as an impediment to building higher density

housing in pricy cities such as San Francisco.

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Carson's comments came the same day that the *New York Times* published an in-depth look at zoning across numerous U.S. cities. The report found that many U.S. cities have zoned the overwhelming majority of their land exclusively for single-family homes, leaving them unable to adapt to everything from population growth to climate change to exploding homelessness.

The *Times* piece was also part of a much broader ongoing conversation about single-family zoning. That conversation has taken on particular urgency in California, where home prices have soared and lawmakers such as state Sen. Scott Wiener have repeatedly tried to pass bills that would diversify the state's housing stock.

> It wasn't always this way. Apartments used to be common. Then they got banned in most of the United States: "Advocates who want to curb single-family zoning, he said, are not pushing an idea that has never been tried before. They're lobbying for a return to the past."
>
> — Scott Wiener (@Scott_Wiener) June 18, 2019

Though Carson has been a controversial figure during his time at HUD, Tuesday was not the first time he expressed skepticism about single-family zoning. In August, Carson pointed to Los Angeles and connected zoning restrictions to rising home prices, according to the *Wall Street Journal*.

Carson also said he wanted to see more high-density development.

“I want to encourage the development of mixed-income multifamily dwellings all over the place,” Carson said.

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