Trump creates affordable housing council, taps Ben Carson as chair

Amid a growing sense of national crisis over the cost of housing, President Trump created a new government council Tuesday and tasked it with clearing “regulatory barriers,” such as zoning, that get in the way of building new homes.

Ben Carson | Credit: HUD

Ben Carson — who leads the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development — will now also serve as the chair of the White House Council on Eliminating Barriers to Affordable Housing. In an executive order Tuesday, Trump said the role of the council would be to increase the supply of homes in the U.S. in an effort to meet demand.

“Increasing the supply of housing by removing overly burdensome regulatory barriers will reduce housing costs, boost economic growth, and provide more Americans with opportunities for economic mobility,” the executive order states.

Trump also singled out an array of specific regulations that he argued are getting in the way of housing construction. The regulations include zoning, limits on population density, “undue parking requirements” and “cumbersome” construction permitting procedures.

All of those policies are the subject of ongoing debate in the urban planning community and are widely seen as needing at least some degree of reform.

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However, the executive order also mentions environmental regulations, which have significant support in the liberal coastal cities that are most severely affected by current housing shortages. Trump has also made rolling back environmental regulations a keystone of his administration, proposing for example a massive expansion of offshore drilling and shrinking protections for rural land in the West.

In other words, Trump's executive order suggests a willingness to rethink contemporary city planning, but still falls well within the president's pattern of attacking regulation generally.

The executive order is also aligned with comments that Carson made criticizing single-family zoning. Carson most recently weighed in last week, saying that more cities ought to follow Minneapolis' example and ditch the practice of only allowing single family homes on most residential land.

Carson had previously criticized zoning restrictions last year.

Single-family zoning is extremely common in American cities, and typically makes difficult to add higher density housing to existing neighborhoods. However, in recent years a growing chorus of planners and development experts has suggested the policy unnecessarily restricts housing supply and pushes home prices too high.

A new report from Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies further reveals that home prices were indeed pushed up by regulatory costs, as well as by resistance to development from local community members.

Trump's executive order Tuesday repeatedly characterizes housing costs as the impetus behind the new housing council. And it argues that a lack of affordable housing reverberates through the broader economy.

"These rising costs are leaving families with fewer resources for necessities such as food, healthcare, clothing, education, and transportation, negatively affecting their quality of life and hindering their access to economic opportunity," the order states.

The order also argues that low- and middle-income households are the most affected by rising housing costs and that there is a correlation between lack of supply and homelessness.

In addition to Carson, a handful of other Cabinet members will sit on the council and hold regular meetings. Members will also solicit feedback from local governments, though the executive order does not go into detail about what policies the council may ultimately come up with.

National Association of Realtors President John Smaby lauded the formation of the council, saying that, despite historic economic growth, misguided regulations have prevented many Americans from purchasing a home. On Tuesday, Bonnie Roberts-Burke, a former president of the D.C. Association of Realtors, attended a White House ceremony for the new council.

"The National Association of Realtors thanks President Trump for taking much-needed steps to address housing affordability in this country, and we look forward to continuing to work closely with the White House to ensure the American Dream remains attainable for all those who seek to become homeowners," Smaby said in a statement.

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