

Carson, in return to Baltimore, backs sales of public housing to private developers

The Baltimore Sun, by John Fritze, Contact Reporter, June 29, 2017, 7:55 p.m.

Dr. Ben Carson, secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, said Thursday he wants to push a proposal to significantly expand a program that allows cities such as Baltimore to sell public housing units to private developers in order to raise money for repairs.

In a series of events in Baltimore — the city where he spent most of his career as a neurosurgeon at Johns Hopkins Hospital — Carson repeatedly touted the program, which local officials embraced despite concerns among some public housing tenants about whether profit-driven developers would be as responsive as the government.

Carson, a former Baltimore County resident who now lives in Virginia, said during a brief interview with *The Baltimore Sun* that he favors lifting the nationwide cap of 225,000 public housing units that could be sold under the initiative, known as Rental Assistance Demonstration.

"In order to put a dent in the tremendous need for affordable housing, we're going to have to switch to a different kind of model," Carson said. "We need to improve upon that program, maybe lift the cap that exists... those are the kinds of models that are going to help us not to continue to create blight."

Carson's support for lifting the cap is not a surprise — the department previously called for it in its budget proposal this year — but his focus on the idea during his visit to Baltimore underscores the extent to which private investment could become a driving philosophy at HUD as the agency contemplates billions of dollars in potential budget cuts.

The Rental Assistance Demonstration program — an Obama administration initiative that Baltimore adopted in 2014 — was the first policy Carson named when asked how his months-long "listening tour" influenced his vision at HUD.

Local housing officials in Baltimore have raised more than \$209 million so far by putting 2,670 public housing units into private hands through the RAD program. That money is used to chip away at a much more costly backlog of public housing repairs, as well as to build new affordable homes.

"He seemed very supportive of the public-private partnerships, especially with the RAD program," Mayor Catherine Pugh said in an interview, noting that the program came up during a closed-door meeting she had with Carson on Wednesday.

Carson's boss, President Donald J. Trump, also has made private investment in once public functions a central theme of his early administration.

But housing advocates said it would be difficult for Carson to expand the Rental Assistance Demonstration program and also sustain the deep reductions contemplated by Trump's budget proposal because the two are intertwined. The president's first budget called for more than \$7 billion in cuts to HUD, including reductions for public housing and vouchers that help families afford rent.

"The rest of the budget is entirely inconsistent with that goal," said Douglas Rice, a senior analyst with the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. "The budget request includes

really massive cuts to public housing funding as well as rental assistance programs that would make RAD entirely useless."

Others have said the government winds up spending more per family to entice private developers into the low income market than if Congress simply spent additional taxpayer funds to renovate its dilapidated public housing stock.

"It would be much cheaper for the federal government to just to appropriate the money," said Jeff Singer, a longtime housing advocate and an adjunct instructor at the University of Maryland, Baltimore, School of Social Work.

Trump's budget has no chance of advancing in Congress as is, but it will likely inform decisions as lawmakers put together spending legislation later this summer. Many of the cuts in the president's budget go after longstanding targets for congressional Republicans.

The budget remains the most concrete policy document that housing advocates have yet to see from Carson's tenure. A rival of Trump's during last year's campaign for the GOP presidential nomination, Carson had no prior experience with public housing before taking the helm at HUD and he has yet to articulate a broad vision for the department.

He has visited about half a dozen cities on his tour, including his native Detroit, to formulate that vision. Asked Thursday if the tour had changed his views on the role of government — which Carson has often defined in stark terms — he said it had not.

"I think they've been solidified," Carson said. "My view of the role of government is to pursue life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The role of government is not to be involved in everyone's life from cradle to grave."

The proposed budget cuts would come at a time when many public housing authorities, including Baltimore's, already are falling short of fulfilling the need for low-income housing. About 75,000 people signed up for a housing voucher when the city opened the wait list in 2014; only 6,000 to 9,000 people are expected to receive one.

The waiting list has since been closed.

Carson visited two homes in West Baltimore where the owners received federal assistance to address lead paint. One of them is owned by Linda Herndon, a 56-year-old who applied for the federal lead abatement program out of fear for how her home might poison her grandchildren.

After qualifying, Herndon moved out of the home in the Hanlon-Longwood neighborhood for two weeks while work crews replaced baseboards, windows and paint. A city official said the abatement projects cost about \$12,000 on average.

Herndon said she first met Carson back in 2007 when one of her granddaughters had a medical issue.

"I am so grateful because they turned my house into a home," Herndon said. "I couldn't have got it done myself."

At another home, city officials said they also sometimes used money from the federal Community Development Block Grant program to repair other issues they find, such as leaky roofs, when they are assessing the risk from lead. Trump's proposed federal budget would eliminate the grant program, which has been criticized by some for not having clear goals.

Carson demurred when asked about that program specifically.

"I tend not to concentrate so much on the name of the programs as I do on the effect," he said. "Do I think it's important to push forward with lead abatement programs? Absolutely. With healthy homes programs? Absolutely."

When Carson returned to the region from Florida this year to lead HUD, he bought a home in Vienna, Va., rather than resettling in Maryland. Asked why, Carson responded with one word and a chuckle.

"Taxes," he said.

john.fritze@baltsun.com

twitter.com/jfritze