

Community View

## Reason needed on housing issue

By Noam Bramson

The political extremism of the Astorino administration is dragging Westchester's housing dispute into a fifth painful year, with devastating consequences for our wallets and reputation:

- » \$7.4 million withheld from municipalities and not-for-profits, with \$10 million more at risk, impacting services, budgets and job creation;

- » untold additional expenses wasted on weak legal arguments repeatedly rejected in court;

- » a broken relationship with the federal government that impedes a negotiated solution;

- » and warnings from the U.S. attorney to hold the county executive in contempt.

County Executive Rob Astorino was elected in part to resolve Westchester's housing crisis. Instead, he has made things worse through a failed strategy of right-wing obstructionism and denial.

We can still turn things around. Here's how constructive, moderate leadership could clean up the mess and help Westchester move on.

First, tell the truth. To find a solution, you first have to be honest about the problem.

Beginning with his State of the County address and in multiple appearances since, Mr. Astorino has mounted an unprecedented campaign of public deception about Westchester's housing obligations — posing as our protector against an imaginary threat of his own creation.

Here is his fictional account: The Department of Housing and Urban Development has increased Westchester's housing requirement from 750 units to nearly 11,000, at a taxpayer cost of \$1 billion, while also demanding the elimination of all local zoning codes to permit high-rise construction in every neighborhood. Fortunately, this scary-sounding description is completely untrue.

Here are the facts: (1) The county's af-

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fordable-housing obligation remains 750 units, with no obligation whatsoever to subsidize additional construction; and (2) municipalities are able to preserve current zoning regulations almost everywhere and are encouraged only to examine unreasonable restrictions on multifamily housing in limited and appropriate locations. (These facts are confirmed in HUD's letter to the county of May 31.)

A defiant and dishonest posture that paints the big, bad federal government as a threat to our liberties may energize those who share Mr. Astorino's right-wing worldview, but this approach can't meet Westchester's real challenge and comes at a great cost to every county resident. The sooner we embrace facts and reject extremist fantasies, the better off we'll be.

Second, stop shouting and start talking. Addressing the unresolved aspects of the housing dispute will require great-

er understanding and cooperation among the parties.

HUD should drop meaningless, inflammatory rhetoric about "experiments," while also realizing that watershed regulations, home rule and other factors really do constrain options in Westchester. The county should stop denying the obvious correlation between housing types and demographic patterns. All sides should use the most current, accurate data and focus on practical approaches that respect community-by-community differences, such as assistance with comprehensive plans, expedited reviews of eligible projects, public education, and sharing of best practices.

The issues are complex, but fairly easy to address through constructive dialogue. If the county executive were at the table and fully engaged, then a few working sessions with HUD representatives, competent professionals and local officials would accomplish an enormous amount.

Mr. Astorino's refusal to join HUD in calm discussion is simply inexcusable. Instead, he has indulged his right-wing hostility to government by communicating via angry press releases, frivolous lawsuits, and overheated speeches. It hasn't worked.

Let's stop shouting and start talking.

Third, seize an opportunity for progress. A forward-looking housing policy is vital to our economy, environment and quality of life. Westchester will grow in the years ahead — the only question is how.

If we fail to plan intelligently, then population growth will gobble up open space, choke roads with traffic, and overburden services.

By contrast, good planning will attract young professionals, serve as a magnet for business investment, reduce commuting times and costs, strengthen our tax base, conserve natural resources, and ensure that working fam-

### THE ISSUE

» Westchester County Executive Rob Astorino has been engaged in a running and, so far, losing war with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development over implementation of a 2009 settlement that requires the county (1) to build 750 units of affordable housing in mostly white communities and (2) to fulfill its longstanding obligations to promote fair housing. Legal positions asserted by Astorino have been rejected by HUD, the court-appointed monitor overseeing the settlement, the U.S. District Court and the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. Expect the settlement to be an issue in the 2013 race for county executive.

» Find more commentary on the housing settlement, including a May 12 column by Astorino, in the Community Views section online, at [www.lohud.com/opinion](http://www.lohud.com/opinion).

ilies and the middle class continue to call Westchester home.

The right path requires vision and focused leadership: We need to work with municipalities to promote transit-oriented development, make infrastructure and transportation investments to nurture sustainable, smart growth patterns, and use free-market solutions to reduce the government's role in subsidizing construction.

We can't shape a better future for Westchester without first getting the relatively simple step of the housing settlement behind us.

Mr. Astorino's extremist politics have wasted money, effort and time, but the greater cost is measured in missed opportunities for progress.

Our actions today will ripple across a generation, and it is high time to chart a better course forward.

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