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# Opinion

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The Journal News

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Our View

## Exec fights HUD with half-truths

Westchester County residents are seeing the clearest signs yet that County Executive Rob Astorino has no plans to fight for — at least not in any way designed to actually win — millions of dollars in federal grants threatened by his wrong-headed implementation of the federal housing settlement. What else explains his recent noise, a doubling down on histrionics, half-truths and distortions about the agreement and what it means to taxpayers, residents and quality of life in the suburbs?

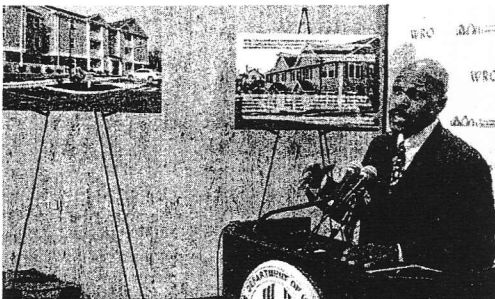
The money hangs in the balance, threatened by Astorino's serial failure to successfully complete a key obligation of the 2009 settlement: properly analyzing impediments to fair housing and crafting a strategy for overcoming those barriers — by legal action if necessary. "That's the analysis I'm looking to see," Deputy Secretary Maurice Jones of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development said in a visit to White Plains last week. "I've not seen it yet."

What Astorino has been busy doing — while HUD officials warn of the impending loss of federal aid — is confusing the public about the settlement's impact on communities; distorting its key terms; and, in the process, sowing fear, engendering hostility and denigrating the settlement's noble imperatives. It is, to be sure, more a strategy for winning votes among the closed-minded and confused, and less about promoting fair housing; it certainly isn't designed to prevail in the courts, where the county's losses have mounted under Astorino's watch.

### Distorted claims

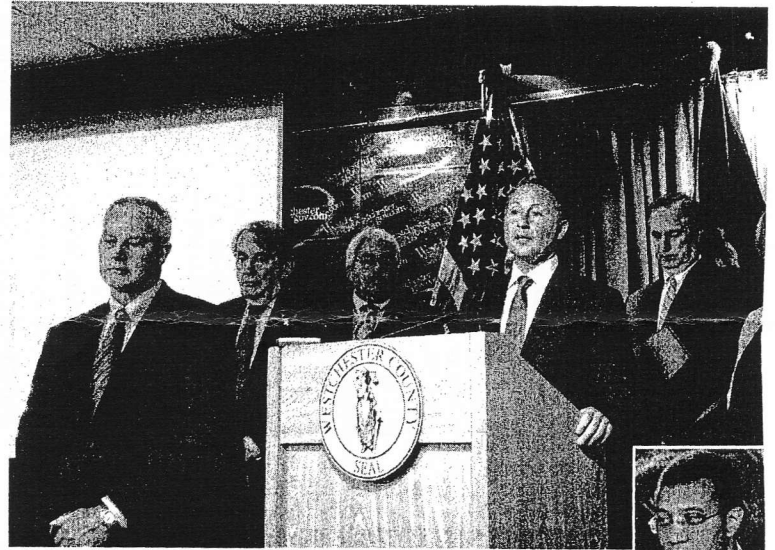
An example of this losing strategy has been on stunning display in recent weeks, when Astorino kicked his re-election campaign into higher gear. He has asserted

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Department of Housing and Urban Development Deputy Secretary Maurice Jones speaks about the Westchester fair-housing settlement on Tuesday in White Plains.

ELIZABETH GANGA/THE JOURNAL NEWS



Westchester County Executive Rob Astorino discusses the 2009 fair-housing settlement at a Wednesday press conference at the County Office Building in White Plains. ALYSON VELAT/THE JOURNAL NEWS



Federal housing monitor James Johnson.  
JOURNAL NEWS  
FILE PHOTO

that first HUD, and then the court-appointed monitor overseeing the settlement, had unilaterally upped the county's settlement obligations to build affordable housing. Astorino has suggested the county was now obliged to build as many as 10,000 affordable-housing units, not the 750 units called for in the plain language of the agreement. The settlement stems from false statements and insufficient past efforts by the county to promote fair housing — despite securing tens of millions of dol-

lars in federal grants while promising to do so.

Astorino said in his State of the County address that the increased burden would cost taxpayers some \$1 billion and result in a 200 percent tax hike. He has also told all who will listen that HUD wants to "dismantle" local zoning; the uninitiated are left to imagine what horrors this might invite: a Cabrini-Green, or maybe a Pruitt-Hgoe, or some other failed public-housing project? Nothing of the sort is in the offing though — by any stretch of the imagination.

### 'Abolish local zoning'

Written and oral assurances from HUD that the asserted representations were untrue have not precluded Astorino from repeating them. Earlier this week Astorino attacked federal monitor James Johnson for citing a county-commissioned 2004 study of housing needs in

Westchester — in preparing an assessment of how 31 communities have met longstanding benchmarks for building some 10,000 affordable-housing units.

Draft "report cards" of the municipalities prepared by Johnson use data from the 2004 study by Rutgers University and a resulting allocation plan for meeting the county's long-term housing needs. For years, the documents have been widely cited by the county, local governments and others, but Astorino now disavows even these goals. "The report cards clearly document HUD's overreaching and the vulnerability of local communities to Washington's attempts to take control of or abolish local zoning," Astorino said.

Both HUD and monitor Johnson reject the notion from Astorino that their mere referencing the goals derived from the Rutgers study somehow constitutes a new demand to build thousands and thousands more units. In any case, as Johnson noted in a June 6 letter to County Attorney Robert Meehan, Westchester's own analysis of fair-housing impediments relies on the same data, as updated by the county's Housing Opportunity Commission. Johnson quotes from the county's April 24 submission: "The Commission has been instrumental in raising awareness of the affordable housing allocations of individual communities and educating people on the need to set and meet local housing goals."

We think County Legislator Catherine Borgia, D-Ossining, put it best, telling The Journal News: "It's foolish to set this up as some kind of incursion by the federal government. This is really just smart planning" — a reference to the Rutgers housing study.

It is regrettable that the county executive doesn't view it that way. He should be fighting for fair housing, in all of Westchester's communities, not wasting time and valuable resources scaring voters and telling half-truths.

(SEE OVER)