

## White House Revamps Relationships with Cities

By: **Zachary Abrahamson**

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The White House announced a sweeping review of the federal government's relationship with cities Monday as part of a day-long roundtable to spotlight the new Office of Urban Affairs.

President Barack Obama pledged what he called the first "comprehensive, interagency review in 30 years" of federal policy toward cities and announced he was dispatching Adolfo Carrion, the new office's director, to meet with local government officials around the country and formulate policy recommendations.

"We're also going to take a hard look at how Washington helps or hinders our cities and metro areas," Obama said in a televised address that featured one pane of teleprompter glass falling to the floor. "We're going to put an end to throwing money at what doesn't work and we're going to start investing in what does work."

Participants in Monday's meetings voiced optimism that the new office will enable cities to work more effectively with the myriad federal agencies that provide funds to local governments.

"What became clear was that this office should best be a vehicle for all of the Cabinet agencies to coordinate on urban matters," said former San Antonio mayor Henry Cisneros, who participated in Monday's roundtable and served as secretary of Housing and Urban Development under former President Bill Clinton. "It ought not to be a competitor, as if it were a new urban program, but rather ought to harness the network of state and local governments across the country so that substantive programs can come together in the most productive way at the local level."

Obama established the urban affairs office by executive order in February, and urban policy experts then heralded its creation as a step forward in federal-local relations. Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell said the last eight years had been absent federal policy directed at cities and hailed Obama as "the first urban president we've had in a long time."

"What we've heard over the months that we've been in this conversation is that local

government officials feel that there is a disconnect between the national government and local municipalities,” said Carrion, who previously served as Bronx Borough president. “That there is too much noise and too many bottlenecks in the way for them to have the latitude to invest in smart ways and make the connections for people the way they live out their lives.”

Monday’s discussions also centered around the prospect of shifting federal policy to accommodate metropolitan areas, as opposed to individual cities, towns or counties.

Ultimately, interagency review and the office’s outreach to local government officials could retool policy to streamline the flow of federal funds to cities. Northglenn, Colo. Mayor Kathleen Novak, who currently serves as president of the National League of Cities, said the office’s recommendations could also shape funding to city governments in the 2011 budget cycle.

“This ought not be viewed as a sideshow,” said Cisneros, who currently serves as executive chairman of CityView, an institutional investor for urban developments. “This is very crucial to the effective execution of the president’s program.”

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*Amie Parnes contributed to this story.*