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Beto Stumbles into a Good Point on Housing Policy

By JIM GERAGHTY | September 10, 2019 4:49 PM



Beto O'Rourke speaks at the New Hampshire Democratic Party state convention in Manchester, September 7, 2019.

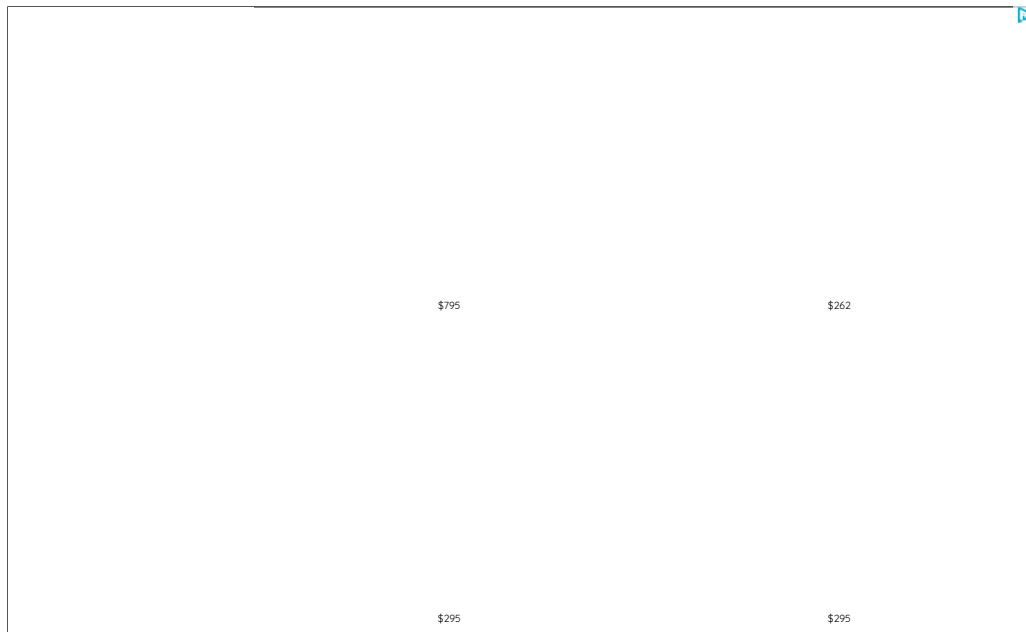
(Gretchen Ertl/Reuters)

To the extent he's getting any coverage at all today, Beto O'Rourke's getting knocked around by right-of-center publications for his tweet late last night declaring that "Living close to work shouldn't be a luxury for the rich. It's a right for everyone." I wrote about it [in the Morning Jolt](#), Tristan Justice writes about it [over at The Federalist](#), Allahpundit [over at Hot Air](#), Timothy Meads over at [Townhall](#) . . .

But as dopey as O'Rourke's invented new right is, his broader comments get to the crux of a problem about *where* this generally good job-creating economy is creating all those new jobs.

Big cities and their surrounding regions are [creating jobs at a healthy clip, but in most places the housing supply is not keeping pace](#). This means Americans are finding the jobs they want in places like the New

York metro area, Silicon Valley, or Sun Belt cities, but they can't find a place to live near the job that's affordable, so they end up living further away. And that means longer commutes, more time stuck in traffic, greater day care and after-school care needs, more missed dance recitals soccer practices and family dinners, and so on.



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O'Rourke would be well served to break from his habitual "fill-in-the-blank is a right for everyone, not just a privilege for the wealthy" framing of whatever he's talking about at the moment. (Today he tweeted, "Women's health care shouldn't be a privilege for the few, but a right for everyone.") Declaring that Americans "have a right to live close to work" is asinine, but declaring, "The country as a whole would be better off if more Americans had more housing options close to their jobs" would probably generate a broad consensus.

In his subsequent remarks, O'Rourke vaguely alluded to the real obstacle to expanding the supply of housing in particular neighborhoods:

Here's a tough thing to talk about, though we must: rich people are going to have to allow, or be forced to allow, lower-income people to live near them.

No doubt you can find rich Republicans who don't want poor Democrats living near them. But by and large, when you have a wealthy urban enclave, you're going to find a lot of rich progressives.

Farhad Manjoo wrote about California Democrats derailing initiatives to build more housing and concluded that "what Republicans want to do with I.C.E. and border walls, wealthy progressive Democrats are doing with zoning and Nimbyism. Preserving 'local character,' maintaining 'local control,' keeping housing scarce and inaccessible — the goals of both sides are really the same: to keep people out." Silicon Valley towns are **kicking out people who live in recreational vehicles**. **Residents of a wealthy enclave in Seattle** shouted down proponents of a proposed tax for homeless services. The **Haight-Ashbury Neighborhood Council** in San Francisco wants to make proposed buildings shorter, and with fewer units.

Wealthy progressives like their neighborhoods just the way they are, and they are interested in helping the poor... move to somewhere else.

If O'Rourke was serious about this, he could theoretically assemble a broad bipartisan coalition of free-market Republicans and poorer Democrats who want to open up wealthy neighborhoods to more housing units. As Phil Klein notes, "right now, there is cross-ideological agreement that local zoning and regulatory restrictions are a significant barrier to building more affordable housing, and creating more housing density. Breaking down zoning barriers has an appeal to free market, limited government conservatives, but also to liberals who see the classism and racism at the heart of NIMBYism."

But that would amount to declaring war on "limousine liberals," and that's not an easy way to win a Democratic presidential primary.

I doubt Beto is interested in taking my advice, but I'd urge him to try this approach. It's not like his other ideas — such as confiscating semiautomatic weapons — are catching fire.



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