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U.S. SENATE CONFIRMS BEN CARSON AS HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT SECRETARY

Senate votes 58-41 to confirm Ben Carson, who will lead agency overseeing housing assistance for low-income households

By Jeffrey Sparshott
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WASHINGTON—The Senate on Thursday confirmed Ben Carson as Housing and Urban Development secretary, placing the retired neurosurgeon in charge of a vast agency with critical roles combating poverty and financing home purchases.

Mr. Carson, President Donald Trump's rival during the early stages of the Republican primaries, was confirmed by a 58-41 vote. He is expected to quickly be sworn in as secretary.

During his confirmation hearing, Mr. Carson, 65 years old, offered few policy details while recalling his inner-city childhood and linking housing to health and broader economic opportunity.

"I actually believe that there is a tremendous nexus, a great intersection, because good health has a lot to do with a good environment," Mr. Carson said during the hearing.

Mr. Carson was caught up in a broader effort to delay votes for a number of Mr. Trump's other nominees. Despite some reservations among Democrats, he moved relatively easily through the confirmation process.

On Thursday, Mr. Carson won support from 51 Republicans, six Democrats and Maine Sen. Angus King, an independent who caucuses with the Democratic Party. Sen. Johnny Isakson (R., Ga.) didn't cast a vote.

Sen. Heidi Heitkamp, a North Dakota Democrat who voted for Mr. Carson, said he "made clear his intention to recognize the full social and economic scope of impediments to safe, affordable housing."

"I'm supporting Dr. Carson today because that approach is crucial to spurring housing opportunity for rural and low-income families on tribal lands and in rural communities alike," she said after the vote.

Now, Mr. Carson will head an agency that had a budget of roughly \$47 billion and some 8,000 employees during the last fiscal year. The department oversees funding for about five million low-income households via public housing and rental assistance. The Federal Housing Administration, which is part of HUD, insures about one in 5 home mortgages. Ginnie Mae, also a part of the agency, holds a portfolio of nearly \$1.8 trillion in mortgage-backed securities used to guarantee government-backed home loans.

Already, the Trump administration has signaled a different tack on housing than its predecessor. Less than an hour after Mr. Trump took office, his administration said it would suspend an Obama administration move to lower annual mortgage-insurance premiums on FHA-backed mortgages.

Mr. Carson also has been a vocal critic of some Obama administration efforts to enforce fair-housing regulations. The rules in question were designed to combat zoning policies that result in segregation, but critics say they undercut local control.

Mr. Carson said one of his first steps at the top of the agency would be a listening tour to hear from officials administering and people benefiting from housing programs to learn what is and isn't working.

"When we talk about HUD traditionally, most people think putting houses over and putting roofs over the heads of poor people," he said. "But it has the ability to be so much more than that."

Mr. Carson served as director of pediatric neurosurgery at Johns Hopkins Hospital, where he became the youngest physician to head a major division, and worked almost 30 years until his retirement in 2013.