

Editorial: Affordable housing

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With newly passed Amendment 1 getting all the attention, it's easy to forget that affordable housing is funded from the same pot of money that now has a portion dedicated to land conservation.

The Sadowski Act of 1992 increased the documentary stamp tax on real estate transactions to fund affordable housing. The increase was backed by real estate and construction interests, who saw that the spending would create jobs in their industries. But in recent years, the Legislature has raided the Sadowski housing trust funds for other purposes.

Voters overwhelmingly approved Amendment 1 in November to require that lawmakers spend one third of doc stamp revenues on water and land conservation. That has left affordable-housing advocates worried that lawmakers will use the measure as an excuse to again sweep money from the trust funds.

The good news is that state economists are projecting a surplus of around \$1 billion. This should be a budget year in which the state reinvests in significant priorities such as affordable housing, which is even more important now that Florida has the third-largest population of any state.

Gov. Rick Scott has rightly promised to boost education spending to a record high. Florida still has ground to make up when compared to other states, but at least we're going in the right direction.

The governor must also pay greater attention to the struggles of lower-income Floridians. More than 900,000 residents pay at least half of their income on housing, leaving them a missed paycheck from becoming homeless.

Scott has backed tax cuts that benefit some businesses but do little for average residents, aside from occasional sales tax holidays and a cut in vehicle fees that saves motorists only about \$25 a year per registration. Now he's pledged to cut taxes by another \$1 billion over the next two years.

Rather than further reducing state revenue and shifting a greater burden to local governments, the surplus should be used to make smart investments.

Using the estimated \$266.87 million in the state and local housing trust funds for their intended purpose in the next fiscal year would create about 24,950 jobs and more than \$3.1 billion in positive economic impact, according to the Sadowski Housing Coalition.

Alachua County and Gainesville would receive more than \$2.3 million from the trust funds. Our community could use the money to help first-time homeowners and rehabilitate housing for seniors and at-risk populations. The community's focus on the homeless could extend beyond the new one-stop center to helping secure permanent housing for those individuals.

Florida voters made a statement when they gave solid support to Amendment 1. Lawmakers can't shirk that commitment, but shouldn't use the measure as an excuse to cut funding for affordable housing.

The state's growing population increases the need for land conservation. It also makes it more important to ensure there is enough affordable housing available to residents.

Using the Sadowski housing funds for their intended purpose would help the state's struggling residents while also providing a boost to the overall economy.