
Implementing Amendment 1: Don't Raid Housing Trust Fund

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Last November, Florida voters delivered a message on environmental protection so loud and so clear that not even the salons in Tallahassee could doubt its meaning. Three of every four voters supported Amendment 1, which mandated funding to help preserve and protect surface waters and the aquifer, the Everglades and beaches, wetlands, open recreation lands and ranches — even geological sites.

Amendment 1 dedicated 33 percent of the net revenue from taxes on real estate transactions, commonly known as doc stamps, over 20 years for that purpose. One estimate pegged the potential windfall for land and water conservation over two decades at \$10 billion. The beauty, supporters maintained, was that revenues would be sufficient to make up for past (and very deep) cuts to environmental protection while not hurting other programs. As Eric Draper, executive director of Audubon Florida, noted in an opinion column in the Gainesville Sun last August, "What programs get cut, who gets hurt, if the Legislature is constitutionally restricted from diverting dollars that historically have been spent on the environment? The answer: No one gets hurt, no taxes go up and no programs get cut."

Yet some lawmakers have openly suggested someone would get hurt in implementing Amendment 1. That would be the Floridians who need affordable housing, and those who supply it to them. Two weeks after the election new Senate President Andy Gardiner, R-Orlando, told fellow lawmakers: "The challenge facing this Senate is the impact Amendment 1 will have on transportation, affordable housing, and economic development, and other priorities which also receive doc stamp funding. In this new reality, as we work to apply this new portion of our constitution and faithfully implement the will of the voters, there is going to be some pain."

Now, as the Legislature's budget-making season gets heated up ahead of the legislative session, the Sadowski Coalition is trying to counteract that prediction. The group — an array of 30 different housing, social service, business, seniors and veterans groups — is campaigning to ensure that an appropriate share of the doc-stamp pie is set aside so low-income Floridians can find a place to live.

In 1992, lawmakers passed the Sadowski Act, which, like Amendment 1, earmarked doc-stamp revenue for housing programs. Not to be confused with the often dismal and problem-riddled public housing projects Washington has propped up for a half-century, the Sadowski Act relies on local government officials and businesses to work. Cities and counties utilize allotted doc-stamp revenues to partner with contractors in building or renovating single-family homes, while also helping prospective buyers with down payments and closing costs. Seventy percent of the

housing trust fund is used this way. A state-approved agency doles out the rest to developers on a competitive basis to boost the supply of rental units.

The Sadowski Coalition projects that the housing trust fund would reap \$267 million in the state's 2016 budget. Of that, Polk County would get nearly \$4.5 million — the seventh-largest amount in the state. The city of Lakeland would get almost \$924,000; Winter Haven could take in about \$340,000.

Lawmakers, first under former Gov. Jeb Bush and then especially during the recession, were not shy about shoveling trust fund revenues — whether for housing, the environment, transportation or other needs — into the state's general fund to pay for government services. The ongoing economic upswing should negate such raids, however. Yet Gardiner and others indicate the housing account must be drained again to meet Amendment 1-style obligations now funded with general tax dollars.

Coalition President Jaimie Ross told us that doesn't have to happen. If lawmakers move those programs under Amendment 1, the housing trust fund can be left alone. "Nobody voted for Amendment 1 and thought they were hurting affordable housing," she said. "It's unfair to do that to ...voters." Her group argues a fully funded trust fund would create about 25,000 jobs and \$3 billion in new economic activity next year.

We must preserve Florida's natural splendor, and not just for aesthetic reasons. It sustains us physically and economically. But all the coalition seeks is for lawmakers to use the doc-stamp revenue as intended more than 20 years ago. Honoring Amendment 1 doesn't have to mean short-changing residents struggling to find housing and idling the workers who can provide it.