

Scott can create jobs giving housing its due: Editorial

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Republican Gov. Rick Scott campaigned in Coral Springs, one of areas of Democratic-leaning Broward County with a large pool of Republican voters on Oct. 24, 2014. Scott won 24.5 percent of the vote in Broward. (Jim Rassol / Sun Sentinel)

In his second inaugural address this month, Gov. Rick Scott left no doubt about his No. 1 priority for his second term. "Jobs will continue to be my mission for the next four years," he declared.

If so, there's a slam-dunk decision he can make in his next budget proposal that will advance his mission to the tune of nearly 25,000 jobs: Simply give the state's programs dedicated to affordable housing the dollars they're due.

More than 20 years ago, a coalition including developers, real-estate agents and local governments helped get into law an increase in Florida's documentary stamp tax on real-estate transactions, on the condition that the additional dollars would be dedicated to affordable housing. That money is earmarked for state and local housing trust funds.

But in recent years, lawmakers have routinely raided the trust funds to cover other, unrelated expenses. That was easier to justify when the Great Recession created annual budget deficits. But next year, the state budget is expected to have a surplus of at least \$1 billion.

Meanwhile, the housing trust funds are due for \$266.9 million from doc stamp taxes. Scott could, and should, send a strong signal to lawmakers by proposing a budget that would keep them whole.

Money in the trust funds is available to meet the pressing need for affordable housing for low and moderate income families through a range of strategies. Building new housing or renovating existing stock. Providing down-payment and closing assistance for first-time buyers. Retrofitting homes for seniors to age in place and persons with special needs to be independent. Housing the homeless.

Money invested for these purposes ultimately goes to private projects and supports private construction jobs. It typically leverages at least four times as much in private financing.

There's an acute need among low-income Floridians for affordable housing. And many moderate income Floridians — including teachers, nurses, police — also confront a lack of affordable options for housing.

Lawmakers who would divert funding from affordable housing again might insist they have no choice after last year's voter approval of Amendment 1, which dedicates 33 percent of documentary stamp tax revenue for land and water conservation. But housing is due only another 12 percent of that revenue. The pie is big enough for conservation and housing, and even the 18 percent of the same funding source earmarked for transportation.

If lawmakers pass a budget honoring the full obligation to the housing trust funds, the economic impact, statewide, will exceed \$3 billion. Governments in Central Florida will receive more than \$20 million to distribute to expand the supply of affordable housing in the region.

That's most likely to happen if Scott proposes a budget that backs up his No. 1 priority.