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IN OUR OPINION

Editorial: Not Either-or

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The Florida Senate has revealed its plan to implement Amendment 1, the state constitutional mandate requiring one-third of real estate documentary tax revenues be spent on conservation measures. There is plenty of massaging and deal-cutting left, but even so we hope this trial balloon gets deep-sixed quickly. If not, advocates of affordable housing, both in Tallahassee and locally, and those who benefit from their efforts, are right to worry.

The Sadowski Coalition, a confederation of 30 different housing, social service, business, seniors and veterans groups, is expressing concern about how significant a setback those groups and their clients face under the Senate plan. The formula drafted under the Senate bill, SB 586, hacks funding for affordable housing programs in the 2016 budget by 42 percent, from an anticipated $267 million to about $154 million, the coalition maintains. Mark Hendrickson, a board member for the Florida Housing Coalition, a partner in the group, told us the cut would trickle down to local governments.

Senate President Andy Gardiner, in a letter to senators earlier this month, was adamant that the "new reality" created by the adoption of Amendment 1 left no other way to meet its mandate. A third of the projected 2016 revenue from the documentary stamp tax — or doc stamp, as it's commonly known — will amount to $758 million. Right now, 20 percent of all doc-stamp revenue — about $471 million — supports environmental and conservation programs. But it's not as simple as finding $287 million to reach the target, Gardiner contends.

"Documentary stamp tax revenues in these trust funds are frequently co-mingled with various penalties, fines, fees and taxes. Given that these monies are fungible, it is impossible to determine whether documentary stamp tax revenues or some other revenue source was expended on a specific program," Gardiner wrote. "Under the new reality of Amendment 1, (this) legislation is essential because Amendment 1 prohibits co-mingling with general revenue that is currently permissible."

According to Hendrickson, the Senate proposal would skim that $758 million for Amendment 1 off the top of the projected $2.3 billion in revenue and parcel out the rest among the other doc stamp-funded accounts — rather than dividing up those shares based on the whole pot. Besides affordable housing, similarly affected trust funds include those supporting transportation projects and economic development initiatives — or, as Hendrickson calls them, the "growth programs."

We would ask Gardiner and other proponents of the proposal: How effective would our state government be if 42 percent of its revenue suddenly vanished?

Gov. Rick Scott and the Florida House have yet to indicate that they will go along. We hope they don't.

Accounts such as the affordable housing fund were repeatedly drained to support other state programs during the lean years of the recession. The 2016 budget was the first time in years affordable housing was expected to receive its full share. A fully replenished trust fund would create about 25,000 jobs and spur $3 billion in new economic activity next year, the Sadowski Coalition argues. The group also believes that the 75 percent of voters who supported Amendment 1 didn't do so because they wanted a trade-off. We agree, and if lawmakers truly want to implement the voters' will, they, too, should not view it as an either/or proposition.

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