

# Orlando Sentinel

## Editorial: As U.S. axes affordable housing, Florida dare not raid trust fund



*Housing (Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda / Orlando Sentinel)*

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It's the best of times and — at least in one critical respect — the worst of times for Central Florida's economy. The region has seen strong job growth; it led the state over the past year. But a chronic shortage of affordable housing in Metro Orlando has been deepening.

In a study released this month by the National Low Income Housing Coalition, Orange, Seminole, Osceola and Lake counties ranked third from the bottom in the nation among metropolitan areas for its supply of housing affordable for extremely low-income residents. The coalition found that Metro Orlando's housing shortage for that group was twice as bad as the national average.

And as Orange County's manager of housing and community development recently told the Sentinel's Mary Shanklin, population growth and a drop in home ownership together have been driving up rental costs to unaffordable levels for many moderate-income residents in the region, too.

When affordable housing runs short, moderate-income residents who form the backbone of their communities — such as teachers, first responders and nurses — often can't find homes near their jobs. Low-income residents are at a greater risk of homelessness. Both outcomes are bad for the economy.

Amid these troubling trends, the timing couldn't be much worse for President Trump's plans for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The budget proposal that Trump delivered to Congress this month called for slashing \$6 billion from HUD's budget, or about 13 percent. The president's proposed cuts for the department include completely eliminating two programs that address the need for affordable housing, Community Development Block Grants and the HOME Investment Partnership.

For the Orlando Housing Authority, which manages public housing and distributes federal Section 8 rent subsidies in the city and the rest of Orange County, the cuts in the president's budget proposal would cost \$1.8 million. They would deal a sharp blow to the authority's efforts to expand the inadequate supply of affordable housing and reduce its long waiting list for public-housing units and Section 8 subsidies. That list has grown to 26,000 families — a 10-year backlog even without the cuts, according to the authority.

It's possible, though not at all certain, that Congress could restore some of the cuts to HUD proposed by the president. But Florida legislators now meeting for their annual session in Tallahassee would be wise to help communities across the state prepare for the worst-case scenario of the cuts becoming law.

The solution is simple. Legislators just need to honor the intent of a 1992 state law their predecessors passed to promote affordable housing in Florida.

That law earmarks a share of documentary-stamp taxes on real-estate transactions for state trust funds to pay for programs to build and expand affordable housing. These well-designed initiatives are flexible to provide communities with multiple options to help families find or stay in homes they can afford, from assistance with down-payments and closing costs to construction and rehabilitation of rental housing to repairs for low-income residents.

The state's affordable-housing trust funds are projected to receive \$292 million in the next budget year. Regrettably, Gov. Rick Scott called for diverting \$224 million for other purposes in his state budget proposal. This was a bad idea when he submitted his proposal in December; it's a terrible idea now that Trump would gut federal funding for affordable-housing programs.

Restoring full funding to the trust funds wouldn't just help alleviate the chronic shortage of affordable housing in Florida. It would boost the state's economy by \$3.78 billion and create more than 28,000 jobs, according to the Sadowski Housing Coalition, which includes representatives from business groups, local governments and churches, together with advocates for veterans, seniors, people with disabilities and the homeless.

The state dollars would provide local governments throughout Florida with grants to offset the federal dollars they would lose under the president's budget proposal. Those governments, and their efforts to promote affordable housing, wouldn't be at Washington's mercy. That prospect ought to be irresistible in Tallahassee.