



Sadowski Coalition seeks full funding for affordable housing in state budget

By: Michael Moline

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Affordable housing advocates urged the Legislature Thursday to spend all of the state's dedicated housing money for its intended purpose, saying that more than 910,000 Floridians pay more than half their income for shelter.

Representatives of the Sadowski Housing Coalition — including Associated Industries of Florida, AARP, the Florida Realtors Association, the Florida Chamber of Commerce, and the Florida Home Builders Association — appeared during a news conference to make their case.

Carrie O'Rourke, of the realtors' group, said it supports the documentary stamp taxes on real estate purchases that finance two housing trust funds even though it's levied against her industry.

"And we continue to support it today, because of the good it does for so many people," O'Rourke said.

"Every community relies on dependable and accessible housing options to stay healthy and vibrant. Without that option, the bedrock of the community becomes weak."

"We as a state can make it possible for older adults to live safely, independently, and affordably, saving the state money, by fully funding our affordable housing programs," said Dorene Barker, of AARP.

"With the aging population in our state on the rise, it is more important than ever that Florida use every penny of its housing funds to support Florida's affordable housing programs."

Gov. Rick Scott's proposed budget would shift nearly 77 percent of the \$293.4 million earmarked for low-income housing next year to other state priorities. That works out to \$224 million from state and local housing trust funds that won't go for their intended purpose.

Yet the need is great, according to member of the coalition. The group is named after Bill Sadowski, a former lawmaker and Department of Community Affairs secretary who died in a plane crash in 1992, and who advocated for affordable housing.

In its Home Matters Report for 2017, the group cited high housing costs for the working poor, seniors, and people with disabilities.

The state's homeless population is the nation's third highest, the report said. Some 34,000 Floridians live in homeless shelters and on the streets, including 2,902 veterans and 6,140 children.

One doesn't even need to be poor to have trouble arranging shelter. In Collier County, for example, the rent is too high for some people in well-paying professions including nursing.

"If a person is making what you consider to be a good income here in Tallahassee, where they might be able to find housing fairly easily, they're not able to with that same profession in Collier County," said Jaimie Ross, president and CEO of the Florida Housing Coalition, a member of the Sadowski Coalition.

Historically, the Legislature has swept about 25 percent of the money in Florida's state and local housing trust funds for other priorities, said Mark Hendrickson, executive director of the Association of Local Housing Finance Authorities.

"During the Great Recession, the percentage that was swept went way up," he said. "In the past few years, we've made significant progress, and we are thankful to the Legislature for the progress we've made in moving back toward full funding."

Of the governor's proposal, he said: "That's a starting point. We work with the Legislature at this point to move forward. Last year, the Legislature's appropriation was well above the governor's recommendation, and the sweep was smaller. We hope we'll be headed in that same direction."