

Editorial: Affordable housing should be priority



Volunteers build a tiny house during the Alachua County Affordable Housing Summit in 2016. [Rob C. Witzel/The Gainesville Sun]

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As Gainesville grows, our community must do more to keep housing affordable while protecting natural resources and the quality of life here.

Further sprawl strains resources as well as our battered and crowded roads. Policies that encourage compact development around Gainesville's job centers offer the promise of a more walkable and vibrant community.

But redevelopment poses risks in gentrifying neighborhoods, forcing out lower-income residents and locally owned businesses. As the City Commission updates its land-use code and the University of Florida moves forward with its strategic plan that encourages development near campus, officials must make having affordable housing into a higher priority.

The Sun-sponsored Gainesville For All initiative to address disparities included a team considering housing and transportation issues. It recommended that the city revise its code to allow existing structures to be converted or new structures to be added to accommodate aging residents.

The team also looked at the concept of cottage neighborhoods, which Alachua County Commission is already considering. The idea is allowing groups of tiny houses with standards different than conventional structures to be built on a single lot.

These accommodations might appeal to both young and old residents who aren't looking for huge homes that are costly to maintain. Other ideas that allow for intergenerational living arrangements and the pooling of resources, such as the Gainesville Cohousing project being built, should also be encouraged.

Another GNV4ALL housing team recommendation is for the city to better connect low-income residents who qualify for federal housing assistance with landlords who have available space. Newly re-elected City Commissioner Helen Warren pledged as part of her campaign to further work with landlords on this issue. We hope she follows through with this and ways to make rentals more energy efficient and affordable.

Continuing to address homelessness in our community is also critical. Moving more individuals from the Grace Marketplace homeless center and Dignity Village tent encampment into stable housing will require a housing-first approach that removes barriers to these services.

The good news is the state of Florida created a tax on real-estate transactions 25 years ago to pay for affordable housing programs. It provides money for rapid re-housing programs, assistance for first-time homeowners, and repairs and retrofits to keep seniors and other vulnerable populations in existing homes.

The bad news is the housing trust funds have been raided in recent years for other purposes, which Gov. Rick Scott proposes to do again this year. Our state lawmakers must fight to ensure this money is fully dedicated to its intended use, which in Gainesville and Alachua County would provide \$2.6 million in the next fiscal year for housing programs.

We should also continue to seek innovative solutions on a local level. The GNV4ALL team considered the concept of a community land trust to purchase properties for affordable housing, which it plans to study further while developing longer-term recommendations.

Our community needs to weigh this idea and others such as inclusionary zoning in ensuring redeveloped areas aren't closed off to low- and moderate-income individuals. Developers must not be able to get approval and incentives only to back away from commitments to having affordable housing, as happened with The Standard development.

While some neighborhood groups criticize the height of new development in making Gainesville look like Orlando or South Florida, a bigger concern is the cost of living here becoming similarly expensive. Gainesville's growth shouldn't come at the expense of affordable housing.

— *This editorial was written by Gainesville Sun opinion editor Nathan Crabbe and represents the opinion of The Sun's editorial board.*