



South Florida's affordable housing situation getting worse | Editorial

By **Sun Sentinel Editorial Board**

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It's the best of times and — at least in one critical respect — the worst of times for South Florida's economy. The region has seen strong job growth. But a chronic shortage of affordable housing in the tri-county area has been deepening.

In a study released this month by the National Low Income Housing Coalition, the Miami-Fort Lauderdale-West Palm Beach area ranked tenth from the bottom in the supply of affordable housing for extremely low-income residents.

Driving home the point even further, a recent survey from the National Association of Realtors ranked Florida as the nation's sixth-least affordable housing market — a reflection of rising real-estate prices and lower-than-average wages.

As Broward County commissioner Nan Rich, who chairs the Coordinating Council of Broward, said earlier this year: "We have a huge affordable housing crisis. Housing is the most critical issue facing a lot of residents."

Nationwide, the average rent is \$1,406 per month. However, every city in Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach Counties exceeds that average except one: Lauderdale, where Zillow.com says the average rent for all homes is \$1,378.

And that's a problem, because when affordable housing runs short, moderate-income residents who form the backbone of our communities — such as teachers, first responders and hospitality workers — can't find homes near their jobs. This is bad for them and our economy.

Against this worsening crisis, President Trump wants to cut \$6 billion from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's budget, or about 13 percent. Specifically, he wants to kill two programs that help people secure affordable housing, Community Development Block Grants and the HOME Investment Partnership.

Given what's happening in the nation's capital, you'd think Florida lawmakers now meeting for their annual session would be trying to help communities prepare for the worst-case scenario. Instead, they are following a similar path.

This year, the state's affordable-housing trust funds are expected to generate \$292 million, but Gov. Rick Scott wants to strip them of \$224 million for other purposes. 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.

Yet the Florida House is onboard with the governor's proposal to sweep the Sadowski Affordable Housing Trust Fund. The Senate proposes a \$129.6 million cut, which while still a sizable chunk, is not so draconian as proposed by the governor and House.

"Housing is definitely a problem, but the issue is, we aren't going to just throw more affordable housing into South Florida," Rep. Carlos Trujillo, R-Miami, told the Miami Herald.

If only legislators honored the intent of a 1992 state law passed to promote affordable housing in Florida.

That law requires that a share of documentary-stamp taxes on real-estate sales be placed in state trust funds that pay for programs to build and expand affordable housing. These initiatives provide 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.

Yet since 2008, the governor and lawmakers have stripped nearly \$1.3 billion from the housing trust funds to spend on other purposes, the Herald reports.

"The word is 'trust'," Rich told the Sun Sentinel Editorial Board. "It's really upsetting when you see this constant (raiding of the trust funds)."

Restoring full funding to the trust funds would not only 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. That's 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 with grants to offset the federal dollars they are about to lose.

The trust fund has helped middle- and low-income people gain access to safe and affordable housing. It has helped neighborhoods and communities. But it is an easy target in Tallahassee.

The next time someone in government promises to protect your money — maybe even put it in a lockbox dedicated to a singular purpose — remember the regular raids on the trust fund for affordable housing.