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A Times Editorial

Editorial: Legislature should stop raiding affordable housing money

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Rents are soaring across Florida and the Tampa Bay area, hitting low-income households the hardest. The state has a dedicated fund to develop affordable workforce housing, but leaders in Tallahassee treat it like a piggy bank and raid it at will. The Legislature will be challenged to balance the state budget on lean revenues, but it should recognize the housing shortage as an urgent need that can't be ignored.

The William E. Sadowski Affordable Housing Trust Fund is supported by documentary stamp taxes on real estate sales. The money, some \$292 million this year alone, is supposed to be used to leverage private and federal funding to support state and local housing programs. But lawmakers have skimmed millions from the fund every year since the recession and redirected the money.

Their timing is terrible. During the economic recovery, housing prices have skyrocketed as homeownership rates remain low. That has driven up the demand for apartments, which has pushed rent levels ever higher. Rents are rising faster in Tampa than elsewhere in Florida, and they still lag behind St. Petersburg where a two-bedroom apartment averages \$1,300 a month. Wages and incomes are not seeing the same rise, and communities are not keeping up with the need for more affordable housing stock. About 1 million low-income Floridians spend more than half their income on rent — a situation that makes saving money to buy a house and build wealth nearly impossible. Minorities are hit the hardest.

Yet of the \$1.87 billion collected in the trust fund since 2009, lawmakers diverted nearly \$1.3 billion to other purposes. This year is shaping up no differently. The Senate's proposed budget steers nearly \$130 million in trust fund dollars to the general fund. The House's proposed budget would rob the fund of nearly \$248 million. That's money that could be providing low-interest loans to developers of moderately priced housing complexes. Or lawmakers could steer the trust fund money to home-buying assistance programs such as the State Housing Initiatives Partnership that help lift people out of poverty and stabilize neighborhoods. But to House Speaker Richard Corcoran, the trust fund is too generous, helping not just bona fide poor people but also those who "struggle to afford adequate housing but ... are fully salaried and employed." That's another phrase for the workforce, who also need a place to live.

Florida has an affordable housing crisis, whether state lawmakers acknowledge it or not. Rents are historically high in the Tampa Bay area, and real estate developers are largely focused on the high end of the market. That makes the state's affordable housing trust fund a crucial tool to ensure a safe, adequate housing supply for lower-income residents. The Legislature needs to protect it, not drain it.