

Hurricane proposal could clash with Rick Scott's budget



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A proposal seeking to fund affordable housing programs in the wakes of Hurricanes Irma and Maria could be underfunded by Gov. Rick Scott's proposed budget.

The policy recommendation, submitted by Altamonte Springs Republican state Rep. Bob Cortes, was mentioned in passing Monday at the House Select Committee on Hurricane Response and Preparedness meeting. Cortes' proposal was joined by 140 other recommendations heard at the meeting as part of the select group's recommendation phase.

Cortes recommended to recreate the Hurricane Housing Recovery Program and the Rental Recovery Loan Program using dollars from the Sadowski Trust Fund. Both programs were spawned by the Legislature following the hurricanes of 2004 and were also included in Scott's proposed budget, "Securing Florida's Future."

But in 2005 then Gov. Jeb Bush and Lt. Gov. Toni Jennings requested \$98 million for the Hurricane Housing Recovery Program and \$177 million for the Rental Recovery Loan Program. Scott's proposed budget requested a \$100 million Hurricane Irma aid package that includes \$65 million in funding for the Hurricane Housing Recovery

Program and \$25 million for the Rental Recovery Loan Program — \$185 million short of the 2005 request.

Scott also proposed a \$91.8 million proposed sweep of the Sadowski Trust, which is \$132 million less than the proposed sweep for FY 2017-2018. Set forth by the Sadowski Affordable Housing Act of 1992, the fund uses documentary stamp tax revenues as a funding source for Florida's affordable housing programs, including the State Apartment Incentive Loan Program (SAIL) and the State Housing Initiatives Partnership Program (SHIP).

There's a bipartisan push to prevent future sweeps from the Sadowski fund. SB 874, sponsored by Naples Republican Sen. Kathleen Passidomo, and HB 191, sponsored by Tampa Democrat Sean Shaw, seek to prevent the dollars from being swept, or repurposed, into unrelated projects or items.

Cortes said that the two programs, the Hurricane Housing Recovery Program and the Rental Recovery Loan Program, have worked well in the past with the Legislature appropriating the one-time funding of \$354.4 million.

Cortes said that would be a "big ask, obviously."

But Cortes, who has been a major voice for Puerto Rico in the Legislature, also said funding will ultimately depend on a number of variables that will be determined as the process continues. He added that the dollars in the proposed sweep might be needed to fund the programs, but that is still unknown.

The lack of affordable housing provisions for those affected by Hurricane Maria in "Securing Florida's Future" likely isn't oversight. Scott's office has maintained it's continually assessing the unfolding crisis of those displaced by Hurricane Maria and that numbers are continuing to change, making it hard to preemptively request dollars.

Still, if the budget is used as a point of reference, funding could come up short for displaced Puerto Ricans seeking affordable housing.

The committee will vote on final recommendations Jan. 8, just a day before Session begins. Those recommendations will be provided to both Scott and the Legislature.

The committee was scheduled to meet Dec. 7, but that meeting was postponed to Jan. 8.