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Editorial: Stop lawmakers' raids on affordable-housing funds

OPINION

By The Palm Beach Post Editorial Board



Affordable housing is out of reach for a growing number of Floridians. Lawmakers aren't helping by raiding a state fund meant to ease home purchases. (Getty Images)

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Years ago, a far more enlightened leadership in Tallahassee created the [William E. Sadowski Affordable Housing Trust Funds](#), which uses doc stamp surcharges on real estate transactions to leverage federal and private funds to help develop more affordable housing in Florida.

Today, housing costs are at a crisis point. Yet Gov. Rick Scott and many state lawmakers seem determined to contribute to the problem by diverting millions of dollars from the housing trust funds to other spending priorities, like legislative pet projects and business tax cuts.

In his proposed 2018-19 budget, the governor recommended raiding \$92 million from the housing trust funds to plug other holes in the budget. If state lawmakers approve, it will be the 17th time since 1992 that the funds will be deterred from their intended purpose: helping state and local services pay for closing costs and down payment assistance, rehabilitation of rental property and other incentives to trim housing costs.

Scott isn't the first Florida governor to use affordable housing trust funds for other purposes. In the past 25 years, the state collected \$6 billion in doc stamp revenue for affordable housing programs. Unfortunately, nearly \$2 billion — about a third of the money — has been siphoned from the funds to pay for unrelated budget expenses.

The diversion of state affordable housing trust funds is an obstacle to local governments that need affordable workforce housing to attract new business growth and keep current government employees, like first responders and teachers close to the communities they serve.

“Do they recognize that we have an affordable workforce housing crisis in the state of Florida?” Commissioner Paulette Burdick asked, while discussing the crisis' impact in Palm Beach County with The Post Editorial Board recently. “Where would they find the replacement dollars in the budget to fund a priority, like housing?”

It's time to halt what has become a tradition of recklessly shifting state revenue. There ought to be a law to help our state elected officials stop themselves from raiding the Sadowski trust funds. Fortunately, there are bills filed in the Legislature to do just that.

Florida [HB 191](#) and [SB 874](#) would restrict the use of affordable housing trust funds to affordable housing programs. The bills, sponsored by Rep. Sean Shaw, D-Tampa, and Sen. Kathleen Passidomo, R-Naples, are a welcome bipartisan approach that deserves serious consideration and debate. Unfortunately, the legislation faces uphill odds against a longtime budget tradition that undermines reasonably priced housing.

The signs of the crisis are crystal clear. Affordable workforce housing has become a critical issue across the state, especially in South Florida.

Palm Beach County's median single-family home price of \$335,000 remains out of reach for many white-collar workers, as well as many college-educated, 30-something

millennials whom firms hope to employ. The median monthly rent in the county is now above \$1,900. As a result, more than 40 percent of households in the county paid more than 30 percent of their household income for housing, and over 20 percent paid over 50 percent.

Add the damage from Hurricane Irma to workforce housing in the Florida Keys and the influx of Puerto Rican evacuees now living on temporary hotel vouchers in Central Florida, and it's easy to see why housing concerns should be a priority in the next legislative session.

Still, the Sadowski funds will be both solution and target. The funds are expected to grow next year to \$322 million next year, a pot of money too tempting for any politician looking for an easy way to address needs.

Lawmakers have an opportunity in the upcoming legislative session to address workforce housing issues to provide relief to Florida residents and employers. Given our state's track record on raiding the affordable housing trust funds, the odds aren't favorable.

The Sadowski trust funds were designed to spur affordable housing options and ensure stability in local housing markets. Unfortunately, Florida's latest housing crisis won't improve until our state elected officials find the discipline to keep their greedy fingers out of these trust funds.

There ought to be a law to help our state elected officials stop themselves from raiding the Sadowski Housing trust funds.