

# The Keys need workforce housing for its economic survival

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If Monroe County doesn't help build housing that restaurant servers, fast-food workers, hotel staffers and supermarket managers, to say nothing of cashiers can afford, its tourism-based foundation will crumble.

After Hurricane Irma swept through the Lower Keys in September — and swept up homes and boats and mobile homes in its path — service workers left Florida's southernmost county in droves. Given their salaries, their housing options were tenuous to begin with. After Hurricane Irma, those options were wiped out. That means jobs have been slow to return, and much of the Keys' economic base remains in peril.

We commend State Rep. Holly Raschein, R-Key Largo, for stepping up to file a request for \$20 million to buy property in the Keys to rebuild affordable and workforce housing. Raschein also is requesting \$2.85 million for a pilot program that would provide 30 pre-manufactured units for displaced Monroe residents. Raschein says that the units could be installed in hours rather than weeks or months, as is the case with traditional construction.

According to the Florida Keys Keynoter, almost 1,200 buildings, both residential and commercial, were destroyed by the hurricane, a Category 4. And this statistic does not include mobile homes. More than 1,000 structures received damage beyond 50 percent of the building's value; almost 40,000 households have applied for assistance through the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Keep in mind, there are about 55,000 housing units in the entire county.

So Raschein has a strong case to make to her colleagues to come through for the Keys. It remains in crisis mode.

But money is not the only resource that's desperately needed. There needs to be an abundance of political will, too. As the push for workforce housing gets

started, so has the pushback. Many residents, understandably, are concerned about high-density and the pressure it can add to public services and infrastructure.

Officials should be clear that they are looking to replace lost, often unstable housing, not add to the population.

There's another challenge against which elected officials should stand firm. They are in charge of a waterfront asset that developers are drooling over. In South Florida, counties too often acquiesce to the temptation of attracting more affluent residents, walling off public assets and — pocketing those campaign donations — at the expense of housing for people who provide basic, and vital, consumer services.

Virtually every county in the state is struggling with a scarcity of affordable housing. Unfortunately, Gov. Rick Scott himself has been of little help. As of November, his proposed budget would pilfer \$92 million from Florida's affordable-housing trust funds and use them for other priorities. The shame of it is that diverting these funds has become a short-sighted tradition in this state.

Monroe officials should be resolute and not waver. Nor should they give in to any potential “them vs. us” hostility, as some affluent residents intimate that affordable and workforce housing will invite less desirable — to their minds — residents.

Nonsense. “Those” people make the Keys the tourist mecca that it is, serving dinners, working the cash register, answering 911 calls — everything vital to a robust quality of life.