



Editorial: Amid influx of new residents to Central Florida, urgent action needed to expand supply of affordable housing

By **Orlando Sentinel Editorial Board**

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Metro Orlando was ranked as one of the nation's hardest places to find affordable housing before Hurricane Maria slammed into Puerto Rico three months ago, and tens of thousands of residents started leaving the island for Central Florida. Many are now living temporarily with family or friends, but are understandably impatient to move into their own homes. As economist Hank Fishkind said in a recent installment of his [weekly interview](#) series on 90.7 WMFE radio, "We already have a huge housing problem that's about to get dramatically worse."

It's more critical than ever for leaders at all levels to act with urgency to ease the region's acute shortage of affordable housing. Fortunately for them, there is no shortage of ideas.

Stop raiding the housing trust funds

Recently a state task force on this issue, convened by the Florida Legislature, came up with a series of recommendations for state and local policymakers. At least one of them, aimed at legislators, is a no-brainer: Stop using state tax revenues earmarked for affordable housing to plug other holes in the budget.

Money invested by the state in affordable housing leverages matching dollars from federal and private sources. As they meet this growing need, those dollars also create jobs and boost the economy. Yet in the past 25 years,

legislators have raided almost \$2 billion from the state's affordable-housing trust funds.

Gov. Rick Scott's latest budget proposal would divert another \$92 million from the trust funds next year. It's past time for legislators to put a stop to this bait and switch with taxpayers.

Several other recommendations from the task force, aimed at local leaders, also deserve consideration. They include reducing or waiving construction impact fees on affordable housing, which can push its cost out of reach of lower-income buyers; easing parking requirements for affordable developments located near mass transit; and encouraging the construction of smaller and more-affordable houses and apartments.

The task force also recommends that local governments redirect more of their state grants for affordable housing from homeownership programs to rental assistance. Trends call for this change in emphasis: The homeownership rate in Florida has been on the decline, while the share of affordable rentals statewide fell from 75 percent to 57 percent from 2000 to 2015, according to the University of Florida's Shimberg Center.

Don't wait for a rescue from Washington

Leaders in Florida would be foolish to delay acting on recommendations like these to wait for a rescue from the federal government. Florida dodged a bullet when negotiators on the recently passed Republican tax bill dropped a plan to eliminate a federal tax provision that spurred the construction of more than 800,000 affordable-housing units across the nation over the past decade. But President [Donald Trump](#)'s administration has proposed a 30 percent budget cut for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the primary source of federal housing aid.

Meanwhile, there is a Federal Emergency Management Agency program that would provide up to 18 months of rental assistance to Puerto Ricans who fled to Florida after Hurricane Maria, but the island's governor, Ricardo Rosello, hasn't asked for it. On Thursday, Rosello did request a 60-day extension on another FEMA program, set to expire next month, that pays for hotel rooms in Florida for evacuees. This past week, a group of state lawmakers implored him to make both requests.

Neither of these temporary programs is a substitute for a comprehensive, long-term strategy to expand the supply of affordable housing in Florida. Even so, it doesn't make sense to leave this assistance on the table when so many Puerto Ricans here need it.

Central Florida's lack of affordable housing isn't just a struggle facing storm evacuees or low-income residents. Middle-income employees holding critical jobs — first responders, teachers, nurses, social workers and others — often can't afford to live near where they work. When it leaves large sections of our community at risk of eviction and homelessness, or forces them to commute long distances, it's everyone's problem.

It won't get any better with inaction.