

Florida Facing Affordable Housing Crisis

By SHAWN MULCAHY • 10 HOURS AGO

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Rep. Sean Shaw (D-Tampa) speaking about his bill to protect the Sadowski Trust.

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In the wake of natural disasters, stagnant wages and a growing separation of wealth, Florida is suffering from an affordable housing catastrophe and concern is growing statewide.

The Florida Legislature has been eroding the Sadowski Trust fund, **which supports the state's affordable housing initiatives**, since 2002. The Sadowski Trust allocates 70 percent of its appropriated money to the SHIP program which provides money to local governments to create and preserve affordable housing. The

other 30 percent goes to the State Housing Trust Fund.

Lawmakers have swept over one billion allocated dollars away from the program and **into the state's general revenue fund**. And the Florida Housing Coalition's Jaimie Ross says many Floridians are suffering.

"You're talking almost a million people who are very low-income households who are paying more than half of that income that they have for their housing," explains Ross. **"So that means that they are really one crisis away from homelessness."**

Couple this with the influx of Puerto Ricans escaping the aftermath of Hurricane Maria and the damage inflicted by Hurricane Irma, and Ross says the lack of affordable housing has become a crisis.

"All of these areas already have tremendous deficits of rental housing," continues Ross. **"So more people coming in is exacerbating the need. So that's why we really need to have more assistance now, rather than less."**

Rep. John Cortes (D-Kissimmee) sees the effects of inadequate, low-income housing firsthand in his district.

“People from Puerto Rico who came down here are living in these motels,” says Cortes. “And March 20 is the last day that these FEMA vouchers they give them and they’re going to be homeless. So in my area, if you’re homeless you’re going to jail because you can’t be homeless in the street.”

The fallout of cuts to the Sadowski Trust are felt statewide. Leon County Human Services and Community Partnerships Director Shington Lamy says the county is struggling to keep up with the need for affordable housing. Leon County has a waiting list of over 300 people requesting help, and the list continues to grow.

“Every time they take money from the trust and convert it over to general revenue, that’s less money for us to address needs of those individuals who are on our waiting list,” explains Lamy.

Lamy says with proper funding Leon could invest money into the community and revitalize suffering neighborhoods. But without adequate resources, he says this problem is here to stay.

“We really really really need the Sadowski Act and the SHIP funds to be fully funded because there is a need,” Lamy continues. “It’s not going away, this is not going to go away, the people aren’t just going to age out.”

Some lawmakers are looking to protect affordable housing funds this session. Two bills would prohibit the legislature from sweeping money out of the Sadowski trust.

Even U.S. Sens. Bill Nelson (D-FL) and Marco Rubio (R-FL) are weighing in on the need for affordable housing before Congress.

“Three hundred thousand U.S. citizens from Puerto Rico have moved to Florida,” says Rubio. “And they enrich our state, but our schools weren’t counting on the kids, so they’ve got to scramble to deal with that. And our housing stock. You still have people living in hotels that have been there for three or four months. And even if they wanted to go out and find an apartment, there’s nothing available.”

Rep. Sean Shaw (D-Tampa), sponsor of the House version of the bill, says taking money from affordable housing isn’t just bad politics, it’s bad governance.

“The other side likes to tout fiscal responsibility,” says Shaw. “You don’t conduct business by sweeping a fund that is dedicated to affordable housing and plug holes in general revenue with it. That is the definition of fiscal irresponsibility.”

He argues this is a self-inflicted crisis. And by using the money to plug holes in the budget lawmakers are breaking their promise to Floridians.

A Senate committee passed the bill protecting the Sadowski fund and voted all \$300 million should be left in the fund. But the bill will face an uphill battle in the House.

Speaker Richard Corcoran has made reigning in the budget a top priority. The house is currently proposing \$120 million for affordable housing projects, with just \$37 million allocated to the SHIP program.