

RECORD EDITORIAL: How about a 'Hands-off' amendment?

The Record ran a story on our Sunday front page titled "Groups push affordable housing plan." When the dust settled, that plan entailed incentives for private developers to construct affordable housing communities.

The local Continuum of Care group assembled contained the right people, including United Way director Melissa Nelson, St. Johns Housing Partnership executive director Bill Lazar, St. Augustine Mayor Nancy Shaver and County Housing and Community Services director Joseph Cone.

Continuum vice-chair Jerry Cameron was ramrodding the meeting. He outlined the problem facing affordable housing in the county head-on. The problem here, and everywhere else in the state, is the fact that governments and non-profits don't have the money to build affordable neighborhoods, and private developers who do have the money, see much greener pastures, financially speaking, in high-end residential development. Why make \$20,000 on a home when you could make \$80,000?

That's not greed, that's free enterprise. And that will remain a constant in the affordable housing equation. So the group's aim is to draw up a plan to put before the County Commission to incentivize the private construction of affordable housing. Cameron is a high-energy advocate and the right person to push the plan forward.

But he's likely to hit a wall at the county. Not only has it shown little interest in advancing workforce housing, it has just OK'd a new impact fee plan that actually raises the fees on residential in order to lower impact fees on commercial building. That's to incentivize more commercial development. And we understand why. St. Johns County has been a bedroom community for Duval County for decades. They provide the jobs, we provide the housing – they get the goldmine, we get the shaft.

Commercial pays a bigger dividend in terms of the higher taxes they generally pay, and the lower costs to the county in terms of infrastructure depletion. You'll hear it all the time: Commercial pays for itself, and more; residential, not so much.

Given the fact that County Commissioners have just let commercial construction off a portion of the impact fee hook, it's unlikely they'll be able to do the same on the opposite end of the issue – affordable housing.

Add to that the fact that St. Johns County has among the highest median home prices in the state, we're behind the eight ball from the start.

There is a way out that we've heard nothing about.

The Sadowski Affordable Housing Act was established in 1992. It took a small percentage of documentary stamp revenues and placed the money into a fund – dedicated expressly to help the cause of affordable housing in the state. Things went relatively well until the housing market crashed in 2007-2008. Legislators began to rob the fund in earnest. They call it "sweeping" the fund in Tallahassee, but burglary is closer to it.

A Miami Herald study last year showed that, between the crash of 2008 and up until 2017, the Sadowski

Fund generated \$1.87 billion, and lawmakers “swept” away \$1.3 billion into tax cuts and pet projects. Just this year, the fund was sucked nearly dry again. But legislators had cover. The affordable housing funds would be used to pick up the tab for the Parkland school shooting. The tab for “hardening” our schools is \$400 million.

Hiding behind the Parkland tragedy was a pretty safe play. But when you consider that Florida’s economy boomed last year sufficiently to raise the state budget by \$6 billion – from \$82.3 billion to \$88.7 billion, you wonder how lawmakers could spend that amount, let alone doing it with a straight face while pinning the cost of Parkland on Florida’s neediest population – the homeless.

That’s crap, and they know it.

This year state voters will see a record number of constitutional amendments on the ballot. A couple of these were citizen-driven, including one that has the potential to end the write-in candidate farce. How about an effort for the 2020 election cycle to gather sufficient signatures to amend the constitution to disallow plundering dedicated trust funds? We’ll call it the “Hands off” amendment. It would be wildly popular with the voters and drive Tallahassee to distraction. This year, the trust fund is estimated to bring in \$314 million.

What could the Continuum group do with a dedicated source of income topping \$5 million a year? The plan is doable. It’s an easy answer; a righteous one, as well.

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