



Hillsborough's Housing Crunch: Searching For Solutions

By CATHY CARTER, STEPHANIE COLOMBINI & ROBERTO ROLDAN • DECEMBER 16, 2018

Back in October, hundreds of Hillsborough County residents packed the pews of Tampa's First Seventh Day Adventist Church.

It was an interfaith gathering of congregations, all members of the Hillsborough Organization for Progress and Equality (HOPE). People chatted and a choir led the group in singing hymns, but before too long, they got down to business.

For the last 30 years, HOPE has lobbied the Hillsborough County Commission on issues ranging from criminal justice reform to senior care.

Long-time member Gretchen Del Savio took the stage to provide the congregation with an update five years in the making. She told the crowd that this was the year HOPE finally got a win on the issue of affordable housing.

"On Sept. 20, the county approved \$5.12 million for affordable housing for the 2019 county budget, and an addition \$1.6 million for 2020," Del Savio said.

The announcement received enthusiastic applause and a round of Amens from the crowd. But the \$5 million wasn't actually what the group wanted.

At nearly every bi-weekly meeting this year, members from HOPE asked county commissioners for the creation of an affordable housing trust fund with dedicated funding of \$10 million annually.



The group says that this kind of money could provide subsidies to affordable housing developers, and it would result in 700 additional apartment units each year.

The idea isn't new: [Tallahassee has an affordable housing trust fund](#) that receives all of the budget surplus each year. And Palm Beach County, [where the average rent of \\$1,900 is out of reach for 80 percent of its residents](#), has a trust fund that is funded by developer fees.

Commissioner Victor Crist, who lost re-election in November, had introduced a motion to explore the idea of having a local trust fund here in Hillsborough. The \$5 million awarded this year was a compromise.

HOPE's chances could be better in the coming year.

Two newly elected commissioners, Democrats Mariella Smith and Kimberly Overman, attended that HOPE meeting in October. They each promised the group they would support efforts to create a trust fund with a \$10 million yearly commitment.

Smith even outlined a way to fund it.

"We are currently giving away a lot of tax dollars to developers by subsidizing development and letting them pay much lower impact fees for building houses than they are charged in other counties," Smith said. "If we charge developers the same as they are being charged in other counties, we could use part of that money for things like affordable housing."

The new Hillsborough County Commission will start discussing new proposals in January.



Changes Could Happen In Tallahassee

State lawmakers also will have an opportunity to address affordable housing when the new legislative session begins in March.

Jaimie Ross, chief executive officer of the [Florida Housing Coalition](#), said a lot has changed since she first began lobbying lawmakers.

She said she used to have to explain why affordable housing was important. Now, it's on everybody's radar.

"I can't get anywhere where folks don't already know that this is a really important issue and it has been most definitely a political issue in the elections that we just saw," Ross said.

During the recent campaign season, every candidate vying to become Florida's next governor supported using the state's affordable housing trust fund money, known as the [Sadowski Trust](#), for its intended purpose. That support contradicts actions of the past 15 years, where billions of dollars have been diverted from the Sadowski Trust to fill holes in other parts of the budget.

Only Democratic nominee Andrew Gillum said he would veto any attempt to sweep money from the state's housing funds. Even so Ross said she is optimistic about what Governor-elect Ron DeSantis will do on affordable housing.

"He has an opportunity now to distinguish himself as a person who is going to bring the program back to being the way it used to be," Ross said.



Already, Florida's incoming Republican Senate Majority leader [Kathleen Passidomo](#) has filed a [bill](#) that would protect the Sadowski Trust from the whims of state politicians.

Ross said if all that money is set aside as intended this coming year, it could put a dent in solving Florida's affordable housing crisis.

Right now that money is estimated to be \$328.2 million.

If fully appropriated, Ross said more than 12,000 affordable housing units could be constructed in Florida. And that's just in one year.

Federal Funding Continue To Be A Challenge

At the federal level, cuts in funding have essentially turned public housing programs into lottery systems. Only one in four applicants ever get housing.

Diane Yentel leads the [National Low Income Housing Coalition](#). She said experts have plenty of data on how to fix the housing problem.

“What we lack is the political will to fund those solutions at the scale necessary,” she said.

Yentel said several members of Congress - from both parties - are starting to pay attention, and are responding with “big, bold proposals to solve the housing crisis, the likes of which we haven’t seen in decades.”

Here are a few examples:

Earlier this year, [Sen. Elizabeth Warren](#) (D-MA) introduced a bill that calls for a \$450 billion investment over the next 10 years to build and preserve



affordable rental housing. Reps. Cedric Richmond (D-LA) and Gwen Moore (D-WI) sponsored a companion bill in the House.

Sens. [Kamala Harris](#) (D-CA) and [Cory Booker](#) (D-NJ) are proposing to create a tax credit for rent-burdened households.

On the Republican side, Sen. [Todd Young](#) (R-IN) introduced two bills, one that would create a task force to study how the lack of affordable housing affects other government programs. The other would incentivize housing agencies to help residents move out of areas

Many of these efforts would cost billions of dollars to implement.

Yentel said it's encouraging to see some lawmakers understand that kind of investment is worth it. But until a majority get on board, these bills will go nowhere. People need to realize that affordable housing affects everyone - even those who can cover the rent, Yentel said.

"Housing instability causes significant negative impacts which one way or another families, communities and the country are paying for through increasing costs in other sectors," she said.

Yentel cited education as an example. When students have to move from school to school or miss class because of housing instability, it disrupts student learning, she said.

"Those kids churning in and out of classrooms isn't just impacting that individual child and their family, it's impacting the entire classroom and the teacher's ability to teach...it holds everybody back," she said.



The impacts of housing on health outcomes is also clear.

“Families who are living in poor housing quality homes have 50 percent increased odds of going to the emergency room for an asthma attack...we’re paying for this,” she said.

Research published this summer from [Children’s HealthWatch](#) estimates the nation will spend \$111 billion in avoidable healthcare costs over 10 years because of housing instability.

“So cities, states, the country are paying for the housing crisis one way or another,” she said. “We’re either paying for it through trying to manage evictions and homelessness and all of the associated costs to families and society, or we can pay for it by investing in solutions to the housing crisis.”

Yentel said all one has to do is look at cities on the West Coast like San Francisco to see how housing inaction has led to a dramatic rise in homelessness.

Hillsborough County and the rest of the nation, she said, could meet the same fate unless changes are made now.