

## Legislature must stop diverting money for affordable housing to pet projects | Commentary

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April 19, 2019

Thieves in the Florida House of Representatives plan to steal hundreds of millions of dollars from money that is supposed to help low wage earners find a place to live — and still be able to eat.

Never mind that Orlando is the single worst place in the U.S. for very low income folks to find a home. Never mind that 72 percent of all employees in Florida make \$15 an hour or less. Never mind that families are paying more than 50 percent of their income and skimping on everything else to avoid living in their car — if they have one.

The House version of the state budget proposes to “sweep” \$200 million earmarked for affordable housing into a giant pool for general expenses so elected types have bucks for their pet projects. Then it diverts the remaining \$123 million for hurricane cleanup, leaving precisely zero for housing statewide.

Representatives love that word “sweep” — it sounds like they’re doing something useful, like removing dirt. But there are no maids armed with brooms here. This is just the Republican-dominated House paying for their pet projects on the backs of the poorest people in this state.

Under the House proposal, six Central Florida counties will be stripped of \$44.6 million they should be getting to put some 4,879 people — that includes veterans and the elderly — into shelter they can afford.

Sine 2001, the housing trust fund money has been going to pay for whatever flavor-of-the-day is most important to the representatives, and this year there is no bigger ideological, unnecessary pet project than charter schools.

Never mind that Florida already has a school system that provides free education. Never mind it’s one of the worst in the nation. Never mind that it’s in dire need of money.

Diverting funds is the representatives’ joy, ignoring consequences their specialty. The result is Florida’s priorities are mightily messed up.

This is a state where 72 percent of wage earners are making under \$15 an hour. The medians for those folks is \$24,400 annually, which makes them eligible to live in an apartment where the rent is reduced — except there aren’t any.

In the \$89.9 billion House budget, having a choice in schools ranks above having a place to live. Money shouldn’t be spent on choices until needs are met. Working families must have affordable, safe places to live.

This must be hard for House Speaker José Oliva to understand or surely he wouldn’t have allowed such a budget to be presented.

The Miami Lakes Republican has the choice of living in four homes he owns, including his \$1.2 million main residence. And here’s betting he doesn’t worry how to pay for his kids’ next pair of sneakers while piloting his sporty Prestige 500 yacht up the Intracoastal.

Oliva’s most recent financial disclosure reported a net worth of \$13.6 million. Kudos to him for being such a canny businessman and investor! Enjoy the fruits!

But ask yourself this: Can people in Oliva’s financial position ever possibly understand the ceaseless grinding of life in poverty?

# Orlando Sentinel

Can they click into the continual worry, the everyday make-do of paying one bill and letting a different one go, the pressure of always saying “no” when the kids ask even for something small, the panic of getting to work when the car breaks down. Only a person remarkably gifted with empathy could cross that divide and get it.

Meanwhile, both the Florida Senate and Gov. Ron DeSantis have proposed budgets that include funding the Sadowski Affordable Housing Trust Fund at \$331.9 million. That’s a good first step. Under that plan, Orange County would get \$16.2 million; Seminole, \$5.6 million; Lake, \$4.1 million; Osceola, \$4.2 million; Polk, \$8 million, and Volusia, \$6.4 million.

Negotiating between the House and Senate versions of the budget will begin soon, and the trust fund money certainly will be a target.

Folks, there is absolutely no percentage in Florida rubbing the faces of working families into the sand. Such a greedy, uncaring action will only cost a community more in cash and in pain in the long run.

Who do you think pays for food stamps when low-paid employees can’t buy groceries because they’re spending 50 percent of their pay on a place to live? Who ends up with the bill when they go to an emergency room because they have no family doctor?

The last time this column examined low-wage jobs and the effect on the economy, some readers said \$10- to \$12-an-hour jobs were for high school seniors and those just entering the job market. Folks, that was true when you were a kid, but it’s not now.

People without much education in Florida rarely make the kind of money they do in Northern states with manufacturing jobs and unions that demand a living wage. When nearly three-quarters of the state’s jobs pay under \$15 an hour, many families are staring down permanent poverty.

DeSantis and the Senate must insist on full funding for affordable housing. It won’t solve the problem, but it’s a start.

Article last accessed on 04.23.2019 [here](#).