

Opinion: Finding affordable housing a problem for the ages

By: Lisa Lefkow, CEO of Habitat for Humanity of Collier County
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Like many Naples Daily News readers, I enjoyed seeing the [July 21st front page](#) which recreated the same page from July 21, 1969 for the 50th anniversary of the moon landing. Also like many other readers, I noticed that the second biggest story of the day was a low-cost housing shortage in Naples — a story that continues to warrant coverage in the Naples Daily News and other media outlets to this day.

In 50 years' time, we've advanced as a society by leaps and bounds in technology, medicine, and science, to improve lives and connect people on a global scale. We've made great strides forward, but access to affordable housing seems to be one issue that remains stuck in the past, particularly in our beloved Gulf Coast community. If anything, this problem has only gotten worse, not better.

Year after year, we see stories about the lack of affordable homes in Collier County. We learn about outside agencies visiting to conduct studies, how we're assembling task forces to come up with a plan, and the state's affordable housing trust fund.

Still, we remain in the same situation.

Those outside studies identify the problem and offer solutions, but that does us no good unless we implement those solutions. Advisory committees can gather stakeholders and make suggestions, but then don't act upon those suggestions, still nothing happens. We can look to the state for money from the Sadowski fund, but when those funds are consistently diverted to other unrelated projects, where do we turn?

As CEO of Habitat for Humanity of Collier County, I see the effects of our affordable housing crisis every day: multiple families crowding under one roof, people living in dilapidated trailers or converted garages, parents working 70-hour weeks to make ends meet, or making difficult choices between paying their rent and necessities like food and healthcare.

Over the past fiscal year, we saw nearly 20 families in our office for every one home that we were able to fund and build, and that number increases every year. As a nonprofit operating independent of government funding and reliant of the generosity of others, we have the resources to address just a small fraction of the need.

Yes, Naples is a beautiful community and people are willing to pay a premium to live here — simple supply and demand, as many are quick to point out. But can we continue to refer to Naples as “paradise” when there's no one to maintain our clubs, resorts and public spaces, staff our favorite restaurants or care for our loved ones?

What happens when a community becomes so expensive and so cost-prohibitive for those who maintain it that they leave to find work elsewhere? This is the trajectory we're on, but one that we still have time to change. Meeting the need for affordable housing is a huge undertaking, and it will only be possible with willing hearts and hands coming together from all sides: local government, nonprofit and for-profit builders, business owners, communities of faith and advocates in the community.

This is certainly not a problem that can be solved overnight, but the Naples Daily News commemorative moon landing edition is a hard reminder that we haven't made even a dent in five decades time.

I would invite you to learn more about the work of Habitat for Humanity and to join us in our effort to offer access to affordable homeownership to low-wage earning families. I also invite you to join the larger conversation around affordability along with others who are determined to ensure that Collier County has a stable and healthy workforce.

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