



Advocates to state lawmakers: Don't raid affordable housing funds in 2020

By Lloyd Dunkelberger
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With the start of the 2020 Legislature a little more than a month away, affordable housing advocates have renewed their plea for state lawmakers to fully fund Florida's housing programs.

Over the last two decades, lawmakers have shifted — or “swept” — more than \$2 billion from the housing programs, which are funded by a portion of the real-estate tax on property sales, to other spending priorities.

In the current year, lawmakers approved \$200 million for the housing programs, including \$115 million for areas impacted by Hurricane Michael in 2018. But they also shifted more than \$125 million in housing funds to other non-housing programs.

“We only have one message. And that is that we use our voice to say: ‘Use the housing trust funds for housing,’” said Jaimie Ross, president of the Florida Housing Coalition.

She was speaking Monday on behalf of the Sadowski coalition, which represents some 32 statewide organizations advocating for more affordable housing funding. The coalition includes organizations ranging from local governments to the Florida Realtors to the Florida Coalition for the Homeless to AARP of Florida.

“But sensible as it seems to the everyday person in the state that the housing trust funds should be used solely for housing, we continue to see an annual sweep of millions of housing dollars,” Ross said.

“And the consequence is a deepening housing crisis in Florida with all of the attendant negative consequences to our workforce and our most vulnerable citizens.”

The advocates praised Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis who for the second year pledged his support for fully funding the affordable housing programs. His \$91.4 billion budget proposal for 2020-21 includes \$387 million for the housing programs.

In recent years, the Florida Senate has supported full funding for the housing programs, but the House has favored shifting some of the housing money to other programs.

The difference between fully funding affordable housing and partially funding it, because of the trust fund sweeps, has a major impact on Florida's major urban areas.

For instance, this year Miami-Dade, Florida's largest county, received \$2.3 million in the State Housing Initiatives Partnership (SHIP) program. With full funding, Miami-Dade would receive more than \$21 million in the new budget year, which begins July 1.

The SHIP funding can be used for new construction. But it also funds an array of other housing programs, including rehabilitation projects, emergency repairs, down-payment money for lower-income residents and home renovations for disabled and elderly residents.

Rep. Sam Killebrew, a Winter Haven Republican, said Polk County received slightly less than \$1 million this year, but would receive more than \$8 million in housing funds if the programs are fully funded.

Over the years, Killebrew said the state affordable housing programs have helped some 4,300 Polk residents become homeowners in addition to providing money for other efforts, such as emergency home repairs for seniors living on fixed incomes.



“If we want to continue to fuel our growth and diversify our economy, we need to use the Sadowski funds to help our workers who are the foundation of our state. And we need to help our most vulnerable population from falling into homelessness,” Killebrew said.

Killebrew and state Sen. Debbie Mayfield, a Brevard County Republican, have filed bills [HB 381](#) and [SB 306](#) that would prohibit the Legislature from shifting money from the housing trust funds.

Ross said the bills would still allow the state to use the housing funds in times of emergency, such as a major recession, but the prohibition would provide some protection for the programs.

“What it does, it elevates the housing trust funds to a place where, for example, the transportation trust funds are in now. The Legislature would have to be more deliberate about using these funds for anything other than housing,” Ross said.

The 2020 Legislature begins its 60-day session on Jan. 14. The affordable housing funding will be part of the state budget negotiations, which will not be settled until the final days of the session, which is scheduled to end on March 13.

The Florida Phoenix reported on the impact of the housing fund decision on disabled Floridians in [this story](#).

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