

## After Sentinel's Laborland series, Central Florida legislators support using hotel taxes for housing and public transit

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Central Florida lawmakers are calling for the pot of local tourism taxes — nearly \$300 million in Orange County last year — to be used to help solve challenges faced by low-wage tourism workers in light of the Orlando Sentinel's Laborland series that detailed the region's affordable housing crisis and failing public transportation system.

The four-part series, which was published in December, also reported on how other big vacation towns such as Las Vegas, Honolulu, Key West and Portland, Oregon already use their tourist tax dollars, generated by a tax on hotel room night stays, to help improve housing, schools and transportation.

But in Orlando, which has seen its hotel tax collections nearly triple over two decades while wages in the region have sunk below every other major metro in the nation, the money is only used for tourism promotion or big venues, such as the convention center and the arena where the Orlando Magic play.

"We have to be more flexible in how tourist development tax money is spent," said Rep. Carlos Guillermo Smith, D-Orlando. "Central Florida's \$75 billion tourism industry was built on the backs of tourism workers who need affordable housing and transportation infrastructure. There is a crisis on both of those fronts. Everything should be on the table to address these crises."

Laborland profiled theme park workers, including one who has slept in her car in the Walt Disney World employee lot on nights she didn't have enough cash to fill up her gas tank for the 63-mile commute home. The Sentinel also reported how region's affordable housing shortage, also the worst in the country, means a father can't afford a bedroom for his daughter. And there was a story of a water park employee who lives just 15-miles from her job, but because she relies on Central Florida's underfunded bus system, Lynx, her commute is three hours each way.

To help ease the housing shortage, some Central Florida legislators are again supporting a bill to prevent their colleagues from raiding the state's affordable housing fund, known as the Sadowski Fund. A similar bill died last year, but attention on the scope of the problem has intensified.

# Orlando Sentinel

Sen. Victor Torres, an Orlando Democrat, said through a spokesman that another raid of the Sadowski dollars could be a “deal breaker” for his support of the budget this legislative session, which starts Tuesday.

“The housing crisis we are living through is self-imposed,” said Rep. Amy Mercado, D-Orlando. “If these trust fund dollars were actually used for housing instead of being used to plug holes created by tax giveaways we would not have the crisis we have.”

More than 120 people responded to an invitation published with the Sentinel’s series to share their own stories and many said they experienced similar circumstances to those detailed in the Laborland stories. Many spoke to living with multiple roommates to make rent because of the shortage of low-cost apartments. The series also reached the attention of Disney heiress and social activist Abigail Disney and Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, who wrote on Facebook that “[Disney] can easily afford to pay their workers enough so they are not sleeping out on the street.”

Disney, Central Florida’s largest employer, has pledged to increase its minimum wage for union workers to \$15 an hour by the fall of 2021. Tiered raises began in 2018. Today, no unionized Disney workers earn less than \$13 an hour compared to last year when nearly 21,000 people made less than \$11.

But dozens of workers told the Sentinel they’re still scrounging to eat and live.

Jennifer Brown, a professional seamstress who has worked for all of Orlando’s major theme parks during her career, has endured four-hour commutes on Lynx buses for 10 years to get to work at Disney from her house in the Williamsburg neighborhood outside SeaWorld. Brown, 40, lives with a medical condition that causes seizures. She isn’t allowed to drive.

She’s ridden the bus pregnant, her legs swollen. Sometimes she worked seven days a week, leaving at 5:30 a.m. for a 9 a.m. shift. A babysitter tucked her daughter into bed.

“I feel like I spent more time on the bus than I did with my baby,” said Brown, who is a single mother. Last month, Brown and her daughter moved into a cheaper three-bedroom house in Davenport where she rents a spare bedroom to a co-worker in exchange for a ride into work.

Kex Sajeski, a 21-year-old Universal Orlando employee, has at times chosen to skip his four-hour commute from Winter Park altogether. Sajeski slept overnight at work about 20 times from 2016 to 2018. Last year, he moved into a friend’s apartment closer to work but he still relies on paycheck advances to hold him over when he doesn’t have quite enough for even basic necessities.

“When I’m a little short on rent or I need some food at the end of the week,” said Sajeski, who makes \$12 an hour, “[but] then I fall into the trap.”

# Orlando Sentinel

Most tourism employees the Sentinel spoke to said they love their jobs in the industry, particularly at Disney and Universal. But loving their jobs hasn't paid the bills.

For Brooke Light, who worked at Disney for 13 years playing multiple characters, a moment of clarity came one day when she couldn't feed her dog, a chihuahua/terrier mix named Fiyero, after a character in the play "Wicked."

"I was at the point where I was only getting scheduled eight hours a week, or 12 hours. My credit cards are maxed out, I wasn't able to buy anything," said Light, 30. "It didn't really hit me until he ran out of food and I just started sobbing on the kitchen floor because it's not his fault that I have no money. God, I can't imagine how people with kids feel. I can be hungry but he doesn't deserve to be hungry."

Light tried to work other part-time gigs babysitting and deliveries groceries to fill the gaps in her pay. For a time, she worked at Disney and Universal seasonally as a character in Halloween Horror Nights. But the challenging hours — done at 2 a.m. at Universal to be at Disney for the early shift at 7 a.m. — led her to sleep in her car and in the break room to hold her over.

Last summer, she left Disney to work as a ropeway control technician for Doppelmayr Cable Car, which built Disney's new gondola lift system, the Skyliner.

"It's hard [to leave] when you get to make people happy, which is awesome. That's my dream job," Light said. "Eventually, you have to make yourself happy first because if I'm miserable, I can't go in and make people happy."

A Disney spokeswoman noted the company's long history of supporting workers. The company, for example, helps subsidize bus routes and more than 11,000 Disney employees are enrolled in the company's Aspire program, which pays for college tuition and other education programs.

"We are deeply rooted in Central Florida as our home, and making a lasting and positive difference in this community is something we've always cared about," Disney spokeswoman Andrea Finger said in a statement. "That's why we continue to actively work with local organizations on finding solutions to important matters that impact the well-being of this community."

## **Changing the tourist tax**

Changing the uses of the tourist development tax has emerged as a potential solution to some of the challenges.

The Orlando Sentinel reached out to the Central Florida delegation in the state House and Senate. Eight legislators responded — seven Democrats and one Republican — all of whom supported potentially adding more flexibility to the tax.

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Sen. David Simmons, R-Altamonte Springs, supports “keeping the promise” made to the tourism industry that the money would be used largely for tourism purposes, but added that it’s difficult to ignore the population growth in Central Florida, where about 1,000 people move each week. Simmons, who is in his final term, said more flexibility may be built into the tax to address problems with transit — if a consensus is reached with the tourism industry.

“This is a tax that the tourist industry agreed to have in place and it is important to respect their impact and their view,” Simmons said. “At the same time, that doesn’t mean that the language ... is immutable and unchangeable, particularly as different things, even transportation needs or other needs [arise].”

Some legislators, like Torres, support earmarking some of the money for only tourism-related infrastructure projects. Others, like Rep. Bruce Antone, D-Orlando, think as much as a third of all tourist development tax dollars — about \$1 billion total last year — should be used for roads, buses and commuter rails like Central Florida’s SunRail.

While legislators said there are currently no bills in the works — the 2020 session lasts for 60 days — more conversation about the hotel tax may blossom in the next year as lawmakers eye the outcome of Orange County Mayor Jerry Demings’s proposed penny sales tax for transportation.

Demings is asking voters to approve a one-cent sales tax increase on the November 2020 ballot, with the dollars potentially going for more buses or routes and infrastructure improvements. The mayor has not yet released an exact plan.

“Whether or not the penny tax ultimately passes is a big part of what the solution could possibly be,” Smith said. “If we end up being able to raise funds from the penny tax that passes, then that directly implicates possible conversations about uses of [hotel tax] dollars.”

In Osceola County, where the public overwhelmingly voted against a transportation tax last year, county commissioners freed up \$200 million to improve five major roads when they voted in November to refinance Osceola Parkway.

Kissimmee Mayor Jose Alvarez, who sits on the county’s Tourist Development Council, said he supports tapping into tourist tax dollars, which generated about \$60 million in Osceola in 2019, to help pay for road projects and affordable housing. It makes sense to use tourist dollars to fund transportation projects since tourists are “impacting our roads,” Alvarez said.

Some members of the tourism industry are eager to support local governments’ plans to help address some of the most persistent complaints from their workers, said John Stine, director of business

# Orlando Sentinel

development of International Drive's ICON Park and a member of Orange County's Tourist Development Council, which makes recommendations to the county about uses of the hotel tax.

"As an employer of this industry, I'm also very committed to working with our politicians ... and looking at what we can do to support their efforts to take care of these challenges we are facing with transportation, with housing," Stine said, adding that he doesn't believe tapping into tourist dollars is the answer.

"...Things like transportation and housing are such large issues that they go beyond the funds that the [bed tax] has, so the [bed tax] is not really going to be able to fix or solve the problem."

Large employers may also be part of the long-term solutions for the housing shortage and transit crisis, Stine said.

"Maybe this is where some of the bigger companies ...should be addressing this," he said. "What can be done in terms of housing? ...If it's not on property, maybe it's near property. Some of the bigger employers in our industry need to continue to look at and evaluate that."

Last month, Universal announced it would donate 20 acres of land to the county to build 1,000 affordable units. The news came after the Laborland series started running and one day before the company was set to come before the county commission on a vote to give the company \$125 million for a \$305 million road to its new theme park.

The vote came near midnight after a marathon meeting, in which dozens of tourism workers, including two profiled by the Sentinel, spoke in opposition to the plan. It passed in a 4-3 vote. One of the dissenters, Commissioner Emily Bonilla, told the Sentinel that she felt the "vote was rushed."

"I felt there was a lot of misleading information to the commissioners. We were left in the dark about a lot of facts," Bonilla said. "I don't know where that charade originated from."

Universal declined to provide more details about its affordable housing initiative.

The vote on the road project, critics said, was another example of the tourism industry's heavy local clout. Bonilla said the theme park giants should do more for workers.

"In an ideal world, the theme parks or the tourism industry, they should get together and take some responsibility with the developers because they both have caused the issue, and start building mixed-income housing ... near these theme parks. And then they should be putting into a fund to pay public transportation from those developments to their jobs," Bonilla said. "Government can assist and jump into it too because we are part of the issue, but so should the tourism industry and so should the developers because we all had a part on it."

Article last accessed on January 6, 2020 [here](#).