

Florida state representatives are fighting for affordable housing funding

Orlando lawmaker talks about solution to Florida's 'affordable housing crisis'

By Nadeen Yanes, Reporter

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. – Florida State Rep. Carlos Guillermo-Smith (D-Orlando) says finding solutions to fight Central Florida's affordable housing crisis is a priority in Tallahassee right now.

The state lawmaker said that in reaction to seeing a story about a single father of four struggling to find affordable housing.

"[It] was a heartbreaking story," Smith said, adding he was sad but not surprised.

Smith says currently 45% of Orlando renters are paying more than 35% of their income. According to U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, affordable housing is defined when a person or family isn't spending more than 30% of their income on rent or mortgage.

"In Central Florida, 12,000 people are on the waiting list for affordable housing. This is simply unsustainable," Smith said. "It is an affordable housing crisis and that's why we have made tackling this at the state level important for us."

CURRENT FIGHT FOR STATE AFFORDABLE HOUSING TRUST FUND

Thursday afternoon, Smith filed an amendment to the Florida House tax-package to move a proposed \$543 million in tax reimbursements for big corporations into what's known as Florida's Sadowski Trust Fund.

The Sadowski Trust Fund was set up to help ease the burden of housing costs, using money collected from a doc-stamp tax on all state real-estate transactions. Specifically, the trust started out with a 10-cent tax on every \$100 of every real estate sale. In 1995, that tax doubled to 20-cents. Each year, the fund collects hundreds of millions of dollars, money that can go a long way to help families and individuals looking for affordable housing: everyone from the homeless to first-time home-buyers.

However, nearly \$3 billion have diverted out of the Sadowski Fund to balance the state budget over the last several years.



"That is dedicated dollars for state affordable housing programs that are literally being stolen out of that trust fund to pay for other non-related priorities," he said.

Every year, Smith said legislation is filed to stop the so-called "legislative sweep" taking the funds from the trust and every year he says the bills hit roadblocks.

Smith said this legislative session is no different.

"There has been legislation filed to prohibit the sweeping of affordable housing funds out of the Sadowski Trust Fund, unfortunately, that legislation hasn't gone anywhere," he said.

The current House budget included diverting another \$200 million from the fund. Smith said Gov. Ron DeSantis has said he opposes the sweeping of the Fund as well.

"The real question is: Will he follow that up with a veto threat?" Smith said. "I think it is important that the governor said not to take money out of the affordable housing trust fund and I agree, but the governor has the authority and power to veto a budget that steals money out of the affordable housings trust fund."

TOURISM TAX DOLLARS FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING?

Also discussed on the House floor Thursday, was the option to use Tourism Development Tax dollars, or TDT, to fund clean water projects. Under current state law, TDT dollars cannot go to projects such as public transportation or affordable housing. Smith is willing to change that.

"The reality is, we have a very limited number of resources to pay for affordable housing and transportation," Smith said. "At the end of the day, every day working people are backed into the corner without the resources that we need to address. At some point the resources have to come from somewhere, I have an open mind and I am open to expanding the use of TDT tax to include other things like affordable housing and transportation. If it doesn't come from there, where is the money going to come from?"

However, he said currently using those dollars for clean water projects is a hot button issue in Tallahassee, expanding that to affordable housing or transportation would have to wait until next year.

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