



OUR VIEW: Legislators display a generous streak

By The Herald-Tribune Editorial Board
March 12, 2020

Fully baked legislation is starting to come hot from the oven in Tallahassee. And it's not all bad.

Today, for a much-needed morale boost, let's focus on two smart moves for Floridians that were executed for us by House and Senate negotiators.

The first will put aside \$100 million for the Florida Forever land acquisition program — one of our few hedges against the sure bet that this state's population will continue to multiply. That's a 200% increase over a stingy allowance of \$33 million in 2019.

"So the emails can stop," noted Rep. Holly Raschein, a Key Largo Republican, in a heartening acknowledgment that sometimes public pressure can succeed in accessing those hard-to-reach spots on a lawmaker's conscience.

For a while there, Florida Forever was starting to look like Florida Nevermore. At least we seem to be edging back toward Florida For Now.

This replenished fund will be the source for purchase of the 5,777-acre former Orange Hammock Ranch in South Sarasota County, and a 559-acre conservation easement in the Myakka Ranchlands in Manatee County. Orange Hammock, a much-needed buffer for North Port's exuberant sprawl, has \$19.5 million earmarked by the state, with \$1.5 million dependent on local donations.

The Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast reports that its fundraising drive has reached the halfway mark, and the remaining \$750,000 or so must be in place by June 1, to make the Orange Hammock Wildlife Management Area a reality. This is a fabulous bargain on a pristine site that came so close to getting saddled with 15,000 homes.

In an even more astounding feat of grace, the House and Senate have agreed to set aside \$370 million this year for affordable housing. DeSantis and the Senate were aiming for \$387 million, but the final figure is much higher than the House's measly opening bid of \$144 million.

And for once this money is expected to go where it's supposed to go. Since 2002, money allocated from real estate transaction fees that was intended to enlarge our supply of workforce housing has been raided by legislators for other expenditures, to the tune of \$2 billion. Led by the Sadowski Housing Coalition, a network of nonprofits and businesses dedicated to the cause of affordable housing, constituents statewide managed to have their outrage against these repeated "sweeps" of the trust fund register with their leaders in Tallahassee.

Environmental conservation and affordable housing: These are perennial necessities, not luxuries, deserving of consistent and reliable taxpayer support. It is gratifying to see them restored to a respected status in state government.

So while we're on a roll, given our Legislature's apparent new age of enlightenment, it seems timely to mention a third looming necessity for which we need to begin saving up right away. That's climate change.

With each passing day and every melting glacier, it becomes clearer that we have two possible responses to the rise in sea level that we have already set in slow motion: retreat or fortify. Our coastal communities must decide on their strategies — to buy out property owners, or protect their investments, or both. This will be horrendously expensive.

Let's start showing how smart we really can be, so future Floridians will thank us.

Article last accessed on March 13, 2020 [here](#).