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Housing trust fund emerges intact, a 13-year first

By Jason Delgado | March 19, 2020

TALLAHASSEE — For the first time in 13 years, Florida’s housing trust fund emerged from the legislative session unscathed, thanks to a unified political alliance and rising pressure from advocacy groups.

The win for housing advocates came even after lawmakers had to tap various programs to build a \$300 million reserve to combat the coronavirus pandemic’s hit to the state economy. They left the housing trust fund of roughly \$137 million untouched.

In years past, lawmakers have drawn fire for tapping into the Sadowski Trust Fund — a pot of tax dollars intended to support state and local housing programs — to pay for other projects or otherwise balance the budget. The Sadowski Housing Coalition estimates the fund has been swept of roughly \$2 billion over the last decade.

But the political winds are shifting, even in the midst of a pandemic, as rents and home prices increase beyond the reach of many Floridians.

Jaimie Ross, CEO of the Florida Housing Coalition, has stood at the forefront of advocacy for affordable housing in the state. She and her coalition of more than 30 organizations credit the changing tide to growing public outcry and Gov. Ron DeSantis, a Republican who pressured the Legislature for a full appropriation.

Senate President Bill Galvano and House Speaker Jose Oliva, both Republicans, also were instrumental in getting a deal done.

“We are going to leave here with that trust fund intact,” Galvano said at a press conference last week, a sentiment echoed by Oliva.

A rising chorus of concern from constituents also pushed the Legislature to act.

“I attribute this stop of the sweeps after 13 years to the strength of constituent voices,” Ross said. “Legislators in every part of the state have been hearing from their constituents about the housing crisis.”

Ross also credits the stories of Floridians affected by the housing crisis and points to those helped by the fund as proof of its potential, from a mother and daughter in Osceola County who moved to an apartment after living in a hotel for 18 months to a 32-year-old Nassau County woman whose home was renovated to accommodate her wheelchair.

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Across the nation, the shortage of affordable housing crisis has grown worse even amid record-low unemployment. While the roar of the decade's economic recovery has dominated headlines, millions of Americans continue to struggle, in part, due to the inadequate supply of affordable rental housing.

According to the [National Low Income Housing Coalition](#), 71 percent of the nation's 10.9 million extremely low-income renter households are spending more than half their incomes on utilities and rent.

Nearly every state has a shortage of affordable housing, but Florida is among states where low-income renters face the greatest challenges. Particularly in the Orlando-Kissimmee-Sanford metropolitan area, where extremely low income households face the nation's seventh most severe shortage of affordable rentals.

It's not just the state's lowest earners being burdened by the cost of living. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, median income households also are experiencing a shortage of affordable housing in Florida.

The challenges faced in Florida are compounded by the nature of the state's job market. While the state is home to industries ranging from space to citrus and nearly everything in between, a large segment of job market growth is rooted in accommodation and food service employment, a sector which reports the lowest average annual wages in the state, according to an [economic overview](#) by the Legislature's Office of Economic and Demographic Research.

Now, as the coronavirus takes a bite out of tourism — and state revenue — Ross said full funding for affordable housing, in concert with the governor's disaster declaration, can help alleviate economic pressure brought by job losses.

As it became apparent that a deal was coming together last week, Ross was heartened.

“Using all the housing trust funds for housing should be the new normal now,” she said.

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