

Florida leaders poised to cut affordable housing to pay for sewers, sea-level rise

By Gray Rohrer | April 1, 2021

TALLAHASSEE – Florida lawmakers have moved a step closer to diverting money intended for affordable housing to pay for new programs to combat sea-level rise, over the objections of housing program advocates who argue the pandemic has created a greater need for housing programs.

House and Senate budget panels passed bills, HB 5401 and SB 2512, on Wednesday that would sweep two-thirds of the money that would go into affordable housing into grant programs for wastewater treatment projects and to address the problems caused by sea-level rise in cities throughout the state.

For the next fiscal year, that means housing programs would only receive \$141 million, instead of the \$423.3 million state economists predict they'd receive.

Democrats opposed to the plan said they want to support funding to fight sunny day flooding, but not at the expense of affordable housing.

“The money should come from elsewhere,” said Rep. Joe Geller, D-Aventura. “This money is supposed to be dedicated to housing assistance and that need has not decreased . . . this is the time to increase those funds, not take two-thirds of them.”

Republicans in favor of the move knocked Democrats for discounting the funding for the environment in the bill, something Democrats have criticized in the budgets passed by the GOP-led Legislature the past two decades.

“I agree with you that we do have a crisis in affordable housing . . . but we also have a crisis with sea-level rise,” said Rep. Ralph Massulo, R-Lecanto.

The money from the affordable housing trust fund goes to the State Housing Initiatives Partnership, and the State Apartment Incentive Loan program, which provide grants to local governments for downpayment assistance to qualified new homebuyers, pay for housing repairs and to give developers an incentive to build low-cost housing.

Supporters of the plan also point to the \$160 million the state has averaged over the past five years in funding affordable housing programs. They argue the \$141 million in the latest plan isn't far off and could be more under future estimates for documentary stamp collections, which are expected to be rosier as the economy recovers from the pandemic.

“It's clearly going to exceed (\$141 million) when the economy gets back to where it will be,” said Sen. Ben Albritton, R-Wauchula, sponsor of the Senate bill.

One of the criticisms of housing advocates of lawmakers is that lawmakers have transferred hundreds of millions of dollars intended for affordable housing programs to pay for other budget items. Under the bill, the programs will be guaranteed to receive one-third of revenue from doc stamps, a tax on real estate transactions, which would give the programs stability, rather than having to compete each year for funding.



“This is going to be a great move for affordable housing,” Albritton said.

But Democrats and housing advocates countered the average funding is only as low as \$160 million because the Legislature repeatedly swept the trust fund to use for other purposes.

There’s a shortfall of 344,000 affordable homes for low-income resident in the state, according to the Sadowski Housing Coalition, a collection of realtor, home builder, housing advocate groups that opposes sweeps to the affordable housing programs each year.

For Sen. Jason Pizzo, D-North Miami, the bill means there won’t be enough money to address the need for housing subsidies in Miami-Dade County.

“This is not moving the needle at all,” Pizzo said.

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