

This is no time to raid affordable housing funds

April 7, 2021

Here's the bottom line: Florida's need for affordable housing options will grow in the coming years. By a lot.

And with the real estate market revving up, the stock of housing that's affordable for middle-income Floridians — young teachers, police officers, nurses and the like — is slipping out of reach, putting them in the same desperate bind that already burdens Florida's legions of lower-paid hospitality, retail and restaurant employees. And when we say desperate, we mean it: Close to 900,000 Floridian households pay more than 50 percent of their income for housing, and that number is based on pre-pandemic costs and occupancy rates.

Left to itself, the market won't solve this problem. Most builders are focused on more upscale projects marketed to well-heeled retirees and others who can afford lots of amenities and square footage. That trend is so pronounced that [a story](#) by The News-Journal's Clayton Park about a plan to build a 283-home cottage-home community in Daytona Beach that's targeted to be "affordable" (but still pricey, with rents projected up to \$2,000 a month) made Tuesday's front page.

The only real solution is the one Florida leaders targeted decades ago: Judicious infusions of state funding meant to prod developers to construct modest (and thus less profitable) units, either as multi-story apartment or condo complexes or smaller, simpler homes. To fund this effort, Florida lawmakers set up a very small tax on real-estate transactions known as a "doc stamp." The tax is small — barely noticeable on the average transaction. But each trickle flows into a mighty river. This year, \$423 million should flow into state and local government housing trust funds known collectively as the [Sadowski funds](#), which also help renovate aging housing stock.

Should, but rarely does. Florida leaders can't seem to keep their sticky fingers off the funding that is needed to ensure the development of lower-cost housing. Late last month, House Speaker Chris Sprowls and Senate President Wilton Simpson announced the most audacious robbery to date: Legislation that will split that funding three directions, sending just one-third toward affordable housing. Not just this session, but permanently. The rest of the money would be allocated toward combating sea level rise and working to clean up Florida's wastewater problems.

These are both worthy priorities — among the worthiest. But why is the Sadowski fund the only source Sprowls and Simpson are considering? There are other big-ticket items in the budget, including a ruinously expensive and absolutely unneeded plan to drive 330 miles of proposed new toll roads through undeveloped, rural communities. That should be targeted first.

This scheme is akin to watching someone stand in front of their house and lament that the only way they can afford food and health care is to deduct that funding from their mortgage payment — while in the background, laborers are hard at work installing a new pool and deck complete with a big-screen TV.

THE DAYTONA BEACH
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This should receive a hard “no” from legislators starting this week as bills executing the Sadowski-fund split are scheduled for floor debate in the House and Senate. And if they won’t stop it, Gov. Ron DeSantis should — with his veto pen. DeSantis definitely understands the need to stand firm: In his budget recommendations, he allocated 100 percent of the Sadowski funds toward housing.

A deal announced late Tuesday would bump up housing's share of Sadowski funds to about \$200 million and include some kind of “pinkie promise swear” language that lawmakers would always leave at least that much. We weren’t able to nail that down before deadline, but it doesn’t really matter: Lawmakers ignore the clear language of existing state law every year they burgle the Sadowski fund. As it was described to us by a few trusted sources, this would be just another speed bump.

Enough with broken promises and with shoving the state’s top priorities into a cage match to fight for funding while in the background lawmakers squander hundreds of millions of dollars on frivolous monstrosities like the toll road boondoggle. Lawmakers can start by voting “no” on this raid and by standing firm in defense of the legions of workers who carry this state’s economy on their backs.

Article last accessed [here](#) on April 8, 2021.