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Opinion

Record Editorial: A bill long overdue, and likely DOA

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If you were looking for legislation this session that deserves to be passed by every ethical and moral standard — but won't be — consider Senate Bill 874 and House Bill 191.

This is the one-two punch — a bipartisan effort to simply force the legislature to make good on its own action back in 1992.

Bill Sadowski was the secretary of the Department of Community Affairs until he was killed here in St. Johns County, attempting to land at the regional airport in 1992. His colleagues named a bill in his honor and memory, and called it the Sadowski Act. That year the cost of documentary stamps on all real estate transactions in the state was upped 10 cents. In the Sadowski Act, lawmakers earmarked that dime to go expressly into an affordable housing trust fund — which has pretty much become an oxymoron since.

The GOP-controlled legislature and, to a lesser degree, Democrats before it, have ruthlessly raided the fund for general purposes, pet projects and pork. It's not called "stealing" in Tallahassee, it's called "sweeping."

But either way, the legislature at times has grabbed the entire amount for whatever the whim of the leadership that year. Over the past 10 years (through 2017), fully \$1.3 billion has been diverted from affordable housing initiatives in the state.

It's important to know that these funds are allocated 30 percent to the state and 70 percent to the counties or cities. The decisions on where and how they are spent is a locally determined choice.

It's also important to know that these funds, commonly known as State Housing Initiative Partnership, or SHIP funds, more often than not leverage other funding sources, expanding the scope of their effects on local affordable housing issues. Moreover, so much of the actual work done on the homes of elderly, poor or simply displaced families is done by community volunteers, again multiplying the effects of the trust funds that actually make it into the communities — if any ...

The SHIP program estimates that 165,000 affordable homes could have been built in Florida over the past decade had the trust fund been allocated 100 percent.

Think about it.

The trust fund currently is nearly \$300 million a year. Last year, Gov. Rick Scott's budget swept \$224 million out of the fund. This year he's advocating a \$92 million sweep — but that's far from a done deal. The Senate appears to be decreasing the sweep, while the House is expected to raid the fund to the best of its ability.

Senate Bill 874 and House companion Bill 191 simply mandate that the Florida Legislature spend 100 percent of the trust fund proceeds to forward affordable housing efforts in the state — to do what it is intended to do.

Especially considering the extent Hurricanes Matthew and Irma had on housing stock here, this seems like a very good time to “put our money where our mouth was,” and put all the dollars allocated to work St. Johns County.

The only way to remove the temptation for the legislature to cut taxes by killing affordable housing initiatives is to protect the Sadowski fund by law. The odds are slim.

Bill Lazar, executive director of the St. Johns Housing Partnership, summed it up pretty well: “They're monkeying around with funds that don't affect the homes they live in.”

We urge readers to let elected officials know that this affordable housing initiative is, perhaps, the highest priority in this legislative session.

Its success will be measurable in dollars and cents, and a viable workforce living, working and growing roots here “at home.”