

Florida's about to foolishly and permanently gut its affordable housing fund | Editorial

By ORLANDO SENTINEL EDITORIAL BOARD
ORLANDO SENTINEL | MAR 26, 2021 AT 8:30 AM

In a year when Florida might get \$10 billion in free money from the feds, when the state is on the cusp of passing an **internet sales tax** that'll produce something like **\$1 billion extra each year**, lawmakers in Tallahassee are once again trying to raid a trust fund that's supposed to bankroll housing programs and housing programs alone.

This time, House Speaker Chris Sprowls and Senate President Wilton Simpson **want to** permanently cut the state fund for affordable housing by two-thirds.

From now on, the **Sadowski trust funds** would be divvied up three ways to pay for cleaner water, flooding mitigation and — oh, yeah — affordable housing. For this year alone, that would mean about \$140 million for each, rather than **\$423 million** just for housing.

Here's the lawmakers' spin: They pinky promise to stop stealing money from the one-third that affordable housing gets to keep. In other words, they say they'll quit doing what the Legislature has been doing for decades.

Just so there's no misunderstanding, we totally support legislative attempts to reduce water pollution, particularly by converting septic to sewer as Simpson proposes, and deal with flooding from sea-level rise. We've been begging lawmakers to do something about those problems for years. It's good to see pollution and flooding are finally on their radar.

But their solution to paying for it — by normalizing the practice of taking money from a fund set up exclusively for housing — is no solution at all.

Affordable housing isn't just a moral imperative. It fuels the economy through construction, creates thousands of jobs and lifts working families out of poverty by allowing them to build long-term wealth through owning a home. And it makes Florida a more attractive location for businesses that don't want their workers living in squalor. It's a sound investment.

The short-sighted budgetary cannibalism leaders are instead proposing is especially galling in a year when the Legislature at last looks like it'll begin doing what nearly every other state in the country does — collect a sales tax on stuff sold online.

The additional **\$1 billion** that tax expansion is expected to generate every year is more than enough for Sprowls and Simpson to clean up pollution, deal with flooding *and* honor a commitment to affordable housing that they have shirked for years.

But Sprowls and Simpson have other ideas for that money. They want to spend it on **a tax break** for businesses that would otherwise see a temporary increase to replenish the state's unemployment trust fund, which is essentially a piggy bank used to pay benefits to people who are out of work.

We've seen this movie before.

During the Great Recession 10 years ago, Florida nearly depleted the unemployment trust fund. Led by then Gov. Rick Scott and the state's Big Business lobby, Florida overhauled the unemployment system and kept business taxes low by cutting unemployment benefits for workers. That's why workers were eligible for just 12 weeks of state benefits — the lowest duration in America — a decade later when the pandemic hit.

Now the state wants to do business another favor, this time keeping tax rates artificially low by using the internet sales tax windfall to restore the unemployment trust fund.

The bill to do just that is speeding along in the Legislature — it passed the Senate on Thursday.

Meanwhile, **a bill** introduced by Central Florida Sens. Jason Brodeur and Sen. Linda Stewart — raising the maximum unemployment benefit for the first time in two decades — is just getting its first committee hearing on Monday. A more ambitious overhaul of the unemployment system introduced by state Rep. Anna Eskamani appears to be getting nowhere.

The pattern should be fairly obvious, as it so often is in Florida: Bills to help business get fast-tracked, while bills to help workers stall out.

Meanwhile, the state is about to get as much as \$10 billion from the American Rescue Plan. Gov. Ron DeSantis **has outlined** more than a dozen priorities, which range from practical (fixing the unemployment system's computer troubles) to pandering (\$1,000 checks for first responders).

Even still, the DeSantis plan accounts for just \$4 billion of the \$10 billion that might become available. Sprowls and Simpson might well be able to fund their pollution and flooding priorities from that instead of taking out of housing's hide.

It's hard to blame lawmakers for going after the Sadowski housing money to fund some other shiny object that catches their eye. The Legislature does it nearly every year and never pays a political price. No one's lost an election because they went along with raiding an affordable housing fund, but they might by defying the Legislature's business overlords.

What Sprowls and Simpson have proposed at least strips away any pretense that affordable housing is a legislative priority, even though access to affordable housing is a crisis in Florida. Nearly every ranking of states for housing affordability puts Florida and Orlando at or near the bottom.

This legislative session as a whole continues to strip away any pretense that the people who run Florida care about the working class.

This economy is and will remain rigged for business interests, and that won't change until the people we send to Tallahassee change.