

A Times editorial

A step forward on affordable housing

Hillsborough County commissioners have taken a modest but important step to redouble their efforts on affordable housing. The \$10 million annual spending target won't come close to ending the local housing crisis, but it will help a significant number of new families and foster closer collaboration between the public and private sectors. Tampa Mayor Jane Castor, who made housing a top priority in her campaign, should look for ways the city could participate.

Commissioners voted in April to create a \$10 million annual fund to be used for building, preserving and rehabilitating affordable housing. That roughly doubles local spending on housing efforts compared to last year. The money will fill a critical gap as Hillsborough and other counties grapple with increased demands for housing in the face of devastating state cuts in recent years.

The commitment brings real money to the table, considering the county's one-time allocation of \$3 million last year and a state contribution that dropped to \$1.3 million in 2018 from \$6.3 million in 2016. More broadly, the commission's move signals a long-term commitment to housing that could leverage new dollars from other public and private sources. The county has an opportunity to leverage money, land and development incentives to expand the inventory of affordable homes and to locate workforce housing close to the growing jobs base.

Commissioners will consider a specific spending plan as part of annual budget deliberations this summer. The need is so great it will require a targeted approach. Four in 10 households in Hillsborough are already considered "cost burdened" — meaning they spend more than 30 percent of their annual income on housing. Some 22,000 people are on the [Tampa Housing Authority's](#) waiting list for subsidized apartments or vouchers. As the *Tampa Bay Times'* Anastasia Dawson reported, a national housing report this year found that the Tampa-St. Petersburg-Clearwater metropolitan area offers only a fraction of affordable homes for those most in need. A growing population will further strain the housing market, as new residents search for affordable options as rents and purchase

prices continue to rise.

The county will consider building new apartments and working with developers on innovative designs that maximize a home's square footage. Tampa officials have explored using so-called "tiny homes" and prefabricated units to make more efficient use of valuable land and living space. The county will need to be creative and reach out to other communities and partners for proven ideas. It should explore incentives and changes to local codes that could locate workforce housing closer to major employers, enabling residents to redirect transportation expenses to housing.

This problem is not unique to Hillsborough; advocates say more than 16,000 families are on waiting lists for affordable housing in Pinellas. Both Pinellas County and St. Petersburg are committing additional millions for affordable housing with money from the Penny for Pinellas. Yet the state continues to shirk its responsibility. While lawmakers assigned about \$200 million for low-interest loans and housing funds in the 2019-20 budget, most of that money is going to help the Panhandle recover from Hurricane Michael. About \$85 million is going to the rest of the state — far short of the \$338 million total package Gov. Ron DeSantis had requested.

The Legislature continues to shortchange affordable housing programs, forcing local governments to close the gap. Hillsborough has stepped up, and Tampa's new mayor and City Council have committed to make housing a priority just as Pinellas and St. Petersburg have done. Stable housing is a bedrock of stable society. It will take collaboration and follow-through to make that a reality for thousands of bay area families.