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## FAST Holds Pinellas County to Funding Affordable Housing

by Michael Anderson // 2013, Fall



In September, the Pinellas County (Florida) Commission approved a new budget that includes \$15 million to affordable housing over the next three years, after a significant advocacy campaign led by Faith and Action for Strength Together (FAST). FAST advocated that a portion of the revenue generated from the Penny for Pinellas County sales tax should be dedicated to affordable housing. The Penny for Pinellas County is a one cent sales tax approved by the voters to support capital improvement projects throughout the County. FAST has been strident in convincing the County that some of these funds should support affordable housing.

Fr. John Tapp of the Holy Family Catholic Church St. Petersburg (a member congregation of FAST) observes, *“The persistence of our congregations in pushing our elected and appointed officials has paid off. We have members of our Catholic congregations living in affordable housing created by the affordable housing trust fund that we got the County to create in 2006. Now we have hope for more families to be helped in the future.”*

FAST is a faith-based community organization of the DART (Direct Action and Research Training Center) Network. FAST has nearly forty member congregations throughout the County. In 2006, FAST convinced the Pinellas County Commission to start an affordable housing trust fund and fund it with an initial \$19 million dollars. To date, those funds along with additional other moneys leveraged have created 1,469 units of housing for families making less than 80% of the area median income, with 280 homes available for extremely low income households. The Affordable Housing Land Assembly Fund supports the purchase of land to build affordable homes for workers and their families and to increase

opportunities for people to work or shop within walking distance of their homes. Land purchased with Penny funds remain under County ownership to make certain that these homes stay affordable and that nearby quality jobs continue to be available in the future.

FAST understood that Pinellas County needed a dedicated revenue source to support affordable housing. In response to pressure from the faith community when the County asked voters to continue the Penny for Pinellas sales tax in 2010, they promised voters that \$30 million of that money would go to affordable housing (\$3 million a year over the 10 years of the tax).

The Penny for Pinellas County fund supports a wide range of capital improvement projects and has been approved by the voters since 1990. The current penny extension is the third ten year approval and extends the one cent sales tax 2010-2020. The County committed 3.6% of the revenue to housing, jobs & human services, with an anticipated \$30 million going into the Affordable Housing Land Assembly Fund. More recently, however, the County has estimated that over the next ten years, the Penny will generate an estimated \$1.4 billion, requiring modifications to the funding levels. The County cut the affordable housing funds from \$30 million to \$15 million and delayed the spending of the funds indefinitely.

FAST, and its member citizens, pointed out to the County that they were still spending these tax dollars for beautification and infrastructure projects. The Affordable Housing Land Assembly Fund directly benefits families in need of safe affordable homes. FAST argued that while median home prices have gone down, rents have consistently risen each year as more people lose their homes and look for homes to rent. First time homebuyers are finding it harder than ever to get loans and down payment assistance. Despite strong anti-tax sentiment, the community passed the Penny for Pinellas tax, with many citing the new allocation for affordable housing as their incentive for voting for it.

This spring the congregations of FAST organized to demand that County Commission keep its promise to voters and fund affordable housing needs. In March more than 2,000 people packed Tropicana Field to demand that County Commissioners reallocate the affordable housing money in next year’s budget. Four of seven County Commissioners committed to fight to reallocate the affordable housing money. This September the county budget passed unanimously with the \$15 million allocated to affordable housing over the next three years.

Rev. Willie McClendon of the Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church in Largo (a member congregation of FAST) comments that *“Families in my congregation are still struggling to find decent, affordable places to rent. With the commitment that we’ve been able to get our public officials to make, to put Penny for Pinellas funds towards affordable housing, hopefully many of these families will get help. This is an ongoing effort of our justice ministry.”*

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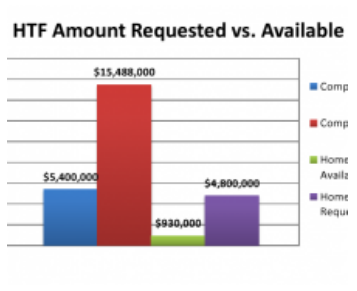


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