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Momentum for Housing Trust Fund in Hillsborough County Florida Grows

by Michael Anderson // 2019, Winter



HOPE members ask support of County Commissioners for housing trust fund at 2018 Nehemiah Action

Building off the historic investment by the Hillsborough County Board of County Commissioners of \$5.125 million in local funding for affordable housing in the FY19 budget, faith and community leaders from the Hillsborough Organization for Progress & Equality (HOPE) are turning up the heat in their campaign to establish a Hillsborough County Housing Fund. HOPE is advocating for an Affordable Housing Fund with at least \$10 million in annual, dedicated local revenue to serve households at and below 50% Area Median Income (AMI), with a focus on the creation, rehabilitation, and preservation of safe, decent, and affordable apartments and single-family homes for working families and seniors with very low incomes. While the inclusion of affordable housing funding in the County budget is a milestone, HOPE is seeking to create an affordable housing fund to assure the resources are available annually and directed to the most economically vulnerable communities members.

“The commitment of \$5.1 million to address the housing crisis in our county is a super first step, and an affirmation for what HOPE has been advocating for all along: With our sky-rocketing housing costs and the pressure that puts on working families, seniors, and other community members, the investment of county funds is an absolute necessity. HOPE applauds the County’s investment as a great down payment, and now we need to make it an annual investment by establishing an affordable housing fund,” said Rev. Steve Kauffman, Pastor of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church.

HOPE is a multi-issue, grassroots, community organization currently consisting of 23 multicultural and interfaith member congregations throughout Hillsborough County, Florida. An affiliate justice ministry organization of the DART (Direct Action and Research Training Center) Network, HOPE’s mission is to promote justice, fairness, and the dignity of people, by engaging and training people to responsibly and successfully act together to hold officials accountable to improve the systems affecting the quality of life in our communities. HOPE is currently advancing and advocating on four core issues: the affordable housing fund, juvenile justice: civil citations, Crisis Intervention Training of law enforcement, and increasing access to elder care.

In September 2018, more than forty members of HOPE attended the Hillsborough County Budget Public Hearing and secured the County Commission's approval of \$5.125 million for affordable housing in the County's 2019 Budget, and an additional \$1.6 million in the 2020 budget. The allocation of local county funds for affordable housing is a first for the Hillsborough County Commission, and a testament to ongoing advocacy pressure sustained by HOPE for the past five years. Following the hearing, the CEO of Blue Sky Communities, an affordable housing developer, described this investment of new local funding *"is nothing short of revolutionary!"*

After cheering on the historic commitment of local funds from the County Commission, HOPE leaders have been engaging in the County process to prioritize uses for the \$5.1 million while pivoting back to advocating for the creation of a county housing fund as the long-term solution the County must adopt. HOPE leaders have recently met members of the County Commission, including a Commissioner who helped champion the 2019 and 2020 budget allocations, and two new County Commissioners who were elected in November 2018. HOPE leaders have also met with the Directors of Hillsborough County Affordable Housing Services and Tampa Housing and Community Development Division, and the Senior Vice President of Tampa Housing Authority. With housing prices continuing to soar at the same time the County is deliberating significant investments in transportation, the urgency to put a housing fund in place to ensure and preserve affordability in the county is increasing.

"We know we still have work to do – for over 100,000 families in our county pay over 50% of their income on housing, rents keep rising, many live in crowded and substandard housing, and families and seniors with low incomes worry about paying next month's rent. We continue to hear heartbreaking stories in our house meetings and believe we must keep pushing for a long-term solution for the creation and rehab of more decent, affordable housing for our community. Our County needs to prioritize investing in housing as it invests in transportation—this is about the long-term infrastructure our communities need to thrive," said Gretchen DelSavio, leader from St. Andrew's United Methodist Church.

Based on research of best practices from local housing trust funds from across the United States, HOPE has developed a vision document outlining the structure and goals for a county housing fund that leaders have been presenting to decision makers and allies. The HOPE vision for a housing fund includes the following priorities:

- Increase the availability of apartments and homes affordable to households at 50% or below AMI (currently at or below \$31,900 a year for a family of four);
- Finance housing construction, rehabilitation, and preservation via grants and loans using a competitive process in harmony with County processes;
- Rely on a County-designated agency to administer the Fund;
- Ensure residents of housing created with the Fund pay no more than 30% of gross family income on housing;
- Local, public, dedicated and sustained funding;
- Foster collaboration between the County and Cities' officials, and the public.

HOPE's vision includes recommendations for community oversight, eligible applicants and activities, and the distribution of funds, as well as recommendations for potential revenue sources to provide at least \$10 million annually for the fund.

On April 1, 2019, more than 1400 HOPE members and friends will assemble for the annual Nehemiah Action, during which HOPE invites decision makers to publicly declare their support for HOPE's priority policy campaigns. HOPE will ask County Commissioners to develop and implement a county ordinance that establishes an Affordable Housing Fund with local, dedicated, public funding of at least \$10 million annually to create, rehab and preserve housing affordable for working families and seniors with very low incomes; and to include this funding in the upcoming budget process.

"The \$6.7 million the Commission allocated for the next two years is a starting place. But with so many working families in the County struggling with the costs of housing – preschool teachers, cooks, teacher aides, nurse's aides, cashiers, Busch Garden employees, waiters and hotel staff people,

restaurant workers, et al – we must do more, and that means enacting an Affordable Housing Fund with at least \$10 million in local public dedicated annual revenue.”, stated Arlene Aranha, leader of St. James House of Prayer Episcopal Church.

To learn more about HOPE’s initiative to create an affordable housing trust fund in Hillsborough County, go to: <http://hillsboroughhope.org/issues-actions/>



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