Editorial: State lawmakers can help navigate Collier affordable housing crisis

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If there's ever a time for Florida lawmakers to make sure the SHIP sails with its full complement of dollars, this is it.

It's the right course to address Southwest Florida's affordable housing crisis.

SHIP stands for the State Housing Initiatives Partnership Program. In Florida, it's one of two affordable housing programs operated from trust funds supported by a portion of the documentary stamp tax on real estate transactions. The other is the State Apartment Incentive Loan (SAIL) program.

The state began dedicating documentary stamp money to benefit affordable housing causes in 1992. At least, it was supposed to be that way.

During the economic downturn, the Legislature needed money to balance the state budget. So it diverted millions from the affordable housing trust funds each year — sometimes all of it.

Mark Hendrickson, a Florida Housing Coalition financial analyst, says all of the money was diverted in 2012-13 and 2013-14 budget years after 80 percent was redirected in each of the three prior budget years.

The trend reversed course this summer when the Legislature approved the 2015-16 state budget. Jaimie Ross, president and CEO of the Florida Housing Coalition, told the Naples Daily News editorial and community advisory boards that the organization is thankful the Legislature appropriated $175 million this fiscal year while diverting $81 million from affordable housing trust funds to help balance the state budget.

The coalition forecasts nearly $324 million could be available statewide in the 2016-17 budget year for affordable housing. The money is distributed to major city and county governments to help first-time home buyers, repair lower-cost housing and help modify homes so senior citizens can age in place, for example.

If the Legislature leaves all $324 million in the affordable housing trust funds in 2016-17, Collier County government could receive $3.6 million compared with $1.5 million this year, according to state records. For Lee County government, it could be $4.8 million compared with about $2.1 million this year, state records show. Those amounts are on top of dollars provided to participating Southwest Florida cities, which would see their allocations double to triple, Housing Coalition records show.
Trust in funds

The Tallahassee-based coalition is sensitive to the challenges legislators and the governor face in juggling so many demands for money against their constitutional requirement to balance the budget.

We're not based in the capital, however, so our empathy is directed back home to the front-line workers in Southwest Florida who are getting priced out of the market as today's wages lag behind escalating housing costs.

A recent Florida Realtors report says Collier's single-family median home price was $405,500 in September, a nearly 16 percent increase over $350,000 a year earlier. Condo prices in Collier rose 6.6 percent over the year to $239,000.

A survey of Lee business operators earlier this year indicated they don't believe the cost of housing is hurting the county's economy.

The Florida Realtors report suggests that could change. In Lee, the median single-family price rose nearly 21 percent in the past year, to $211,578 from $175,000. Florida Realtors said Lee condo prices were up nearly 11 percent, to $188,000 from $170,500 a year ago.

Recovery in place

Rather than second guess what the Legislature did during the economic downturn, we point to soaring housing prices to suggest the recovery is taking hold in both counties and strapping the workforce. Therefore, it's time for the Legislature, when it convenes in January to pass a fiscal 2016-17 budget, to leave affordable housing trust funds to their original intended purpose.

Southwest Florida teachers, law officers, nurses, firefighters and the like deserve to go home to decent housing. But in addition, the Housing Coalition says 900,000 very low income Floridians are paying more than 50 percent of their earnings for housing — meaning one large unexpected bill could sink them.

Many workers and seniors can benefit if there is a place for them on the SHIP, one that's fully equipped. One that can help Southwest Florida navigate its affordable housing crisis.