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## Legislators eyeing new angles to tackling housing crunch

TALLAHASSEE -- A young teacher calls it a day and heads across the football field to his apartment near the bleachers. Another gets in her car and drives to the new home she bought with the help of \$8,000 contributed by the state to her down payment.

The widening gap between the salaries of workers essential to making Florida communities run and the cost of the housing they require to keep them in those communities is triggering some legislation this year that may have arched some eyebrows a few years ago -- but not anymore.

With turnover among new teachers approaching 50 percent statewide and other large public and private employees struggling to keep up with the demands of growth, affordable housing in nontraditional public venues and down payment assistance may soon be in the toolboxes of local and state governments struggling to recruit and retain their work force.

A workshop on affordable housing Tuesday before the House Growth Management Committee drew the interest and attention of more than a few legislators who dropped in for a sneak preview of some of the legislative approaches they will likely be asked to consider in the coming months.

Two pieces of legislation in particular -- HB 835, which includes the down payment assistance for teachers proposed by Rep. Frank Attkisson, R-Kissimmee, and a yet-to-be-filed bill by Rep. Mike Davis, R-Naples, which would ease statutory restrictions to allow workforce housing to be constructed and run by most public taxing authorities -- caught the attention of onlookers.

"We have an especially chronic shortage of math, science, reading and ESE teachers," Attkisson said. "Under my bill, to be eligible for the (down payment) assistance, they would have to agree to teach in the community for five years. If they left before then, a lien on the house would return the money to the state."

Money for the \$50 million pilot program would come from the state's affordable housing trust fund which, thanks to booming revenue from real estate documentary stamps, has swelled to about \$900 million, he said.

Davis' proposal, which is still being drafted, contemplates allowing nearly all taxing bodies that own property to use it to help ease the housing crunch.

"Fire districts, county and city governments, school districts, hospitals;

they're all having a difficult time finding housing for their employees, especially entry-level ones that are new to their careers just starting out," he said. "They all own land and they all build buildings. Why not let them add to the supply of housing and help ease demand?"

[Charlotte County School Board](#) member Lee Swift said he's heard proposals similar to Attkisson's and Davis' broached by other school officials around the state, and he's not laughing them off.

"They certainly merit further discussion," said Swift. "Eight thousand dollars probably isn't going to get the price of a house down enough to make it affordable for a new teacher. And I wonder if urban counties would have enough available land for both schools and housing, although I'm sure we probably would have enough here in Charlotte County.

"But the concepts are basically good ones, and before we pursue them or discard them, we've got to have the discussion. We have to think outside the box, and I'm glad they are looking at new ideas."

Rep. Paige Kreegel, R-Punta Gorda, who sat in on the meeting, said it was interesting, but that he was hopeful existing solutions would remain a part of the dialogue.


"They're all good ideas, but there are other ideas, too," he said. "I think there's things we can do outside of building them a new home. The answer could be a combination of helping them out with down payments and having designated low-impact-fee zones. Easing some regulations to help them makes sense to me since the regulations that are in place contributed to the problem in the first place.

"And, after all, these are the people who provide the services for the people who impact it."

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