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A little help for home buyers

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Manatee County Administrator Ernie Padgett said it's hard to find affordable homes in the county.

Skyrocketing real estate prices all across the Bay area are forcing many middle-class families out of the housing market.

So Manatee County is working to provide a special housing bracket for middle-income buyers, called workforce houses. The houses are geared toward Manatee County families who can't afford new homes in the area, but can afford a little more than most.

Manatee County Administrator Ernie Padgett said with most home prices around \$320,000, it's a challenge to find a home in Manatee County.

"If there's not a continual thrust on this front, it's going to get worse and worse here in Manatee County," Padgett said. "While affordable housing is for those in the lower-income bracket, workforce housing is for your teachers, county employees or police officers who cannot afford new homes in the area unless they bought before the market boom."

To help those who want to buy now, Manatee County is offering developers breaks on impact fee breaks and fast-track approval on new-home projects, both crucial in the construction industry.



"The workforce category was designated to fill a hole between affordable at 160 and the high end, at what we construed at the time to be the low end of what most builders were building," said Dan Barwick, CEO of Demorgan Communities.

And with the low end climbing higher on an almost daily basis, the county is left with a continually growing gap in home costs.

"You can't have wages going up at 3 percent and housing at 12 percent for very long," Barwick said. "That's sort of, some day is going to catch up with you."

But Padgett said the workforce category is a step in the right direction.

"We're probably a lot further along than we were, than we've ever been," Padgett said.

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