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Will affordable housing funding change? Realtor groups push constitutional change

BY JIM SAUNDERS *NEWS SERVICE OF FLORIDA*

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Realtor groups are investing millions into an effort to revise the constitution to require money for affordable housing. Above: Completed in 2020, the construction site of Habitat for Humanity's Windley Point affordable housing project in 2019 in Islamorada. DAVID GOODHUE/DGOODHUE@FLKEYSNEWS.COM
TALLAHASSEE

Realtor groups have poured another \$8 million into an effort to put a proposed constitutional amendment on the 2022 ballot that would ensure money for affordable-housing programs, a newly filed finance report shows.

The group Florida Realtors funneled \$5 million in June to the political committee Floridians for Housing, while the National Association of Realtors chipped in another \$3 million. Florida Realtors had earlier contributed \$5 million, bringing the total amount raised by the committee to \$13 million.

The committee in June also paid \$2.5 million to SGS, Inc., a Gainesville firm. While the finance report filed with the state Division of Elections provides little information about the expenditure, most of the money raised by the committee this year likely will go toward collecting petition signatures.

To reach the ballot, backers of the proposed amendment will need to submit 891,589 valid petition signatures by a Feb. 1 deadline. As a preliminary step, the committee needs to submit 222,898 signatures to trigger a crucial Florida Supreme Court review of the proposed ballot wording.

As of Wednesday afternoon, the Division of Elections website showed 106 valid signatures had been tallied for the initiative.

The [proposed constitutional amendment](#) comes after years of frustration in the real estate industry and among other groups about decisions by lawmakers to use money from a state affordable-housing trust fund, known as the Sadowski trust fund, for other purposes.

If approved by 60 percent of voters, the proposed ballot measure would establish in the Florida Constitution the State Housing Trust Fund and the Local Government Housing Trust Fund. It would require that the trust funds receive at least 25 percent of the revenue from documentary-stamp taxes — which are collected on real estate transactions — and would detail how the money could be used to address affordable housing.

The housing proposal likely would be one of the highest-profile initiatives on the November 2022 ballot and comes after Republican lawmakers have taken a series of steps to try to make it harder to pass constitutional amendments.

Those steps included passing a law this year that would place a \$3,000 limit on contributions to political committees as they collect petition signatures for ballot initiatives. The limit would make it much harder — critics say impossible — to collect the required petition signatures.

The law (SB 1890) was slated to take effect July 1, which was after the multimillion-dollar contributions to the affordable-housing initiative. But U.S. District Judge Allen Winsor last week blocked the law, saying it runs afoul of the First Amendment.

Political committees face a Monday deadline for filing updated finance reports with the Division of Elections. Another proposed constitutional amendment that could draw large amounts of money is an initiative to legalize sports betting across Florida.

DraftKings and FanDuel, two major online sports-betting platforms, are backing the proposal, which would require that taxes collected on sports betting go to education. The political committee Florida Education Champions, which is heading the initiative, had not posted a finance report as of Wednesday afternoon.