

Where will the teachers live?

School boards in hot real estate markets are pushing a proposal to build affordable housing for teachers.

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Published April 23, 2006

Just two years ago, the promise of sunshine, Walt Disney World and cheap housing made it a cinch attracting teachers to Osceola County.

"Affordable housing was in our bag of tricks," said Greg White, the recruitment director for the school district of one of Orlando's bedroom communities. "But we've lost that tool. Now there's nowhere for teachers to live."

After more than five years of rocketing housing prices, vanishing rentals and flat wages, professionals who make up the DNA of any community - nurses, police officers, firefighters - are getting priced out of certain Florida locales.

It's the predicament of teachers, however, that could provoke a response from state lawmakers that will be felt for years.

School boards in hothouse real estate markets in Key West, Naples and Osceola are pushing for a measure that would give them an entree into the world of housing development.

Boards would be allowed to team with developers and give them low-cost, long-term leases to school property. In exchange, developers would build apartments with below-market rents.

Teachers would get first shot at renting. Other governmental workers considered essential, like police and firefighters, would be allowed to rent, too.

If passed, the legislation could usher in a new era of segregated housing. A throwback in many ways to the early 20th century model of company towns, these new communities would cluster young teachers into living arrangements governed by etiquette and laws not yet established.

For instance, would there be a problem if teachers smoke or drank alcohol in their subsidized apartments during off-hours when that behavior is prohibited on school property? How does a district resolve disputes between neighbors who teach at the same school? What becomes of a teacher's home if he or she is fired?

"It's not a good idea," said Lyle Farmar, a teacher advocate in Collier County. "I couldn't ask teachers to live at the same place they work. Why don't they just sleep at their desks?"

Among administrators, however, dedicated teacher housing is gaining credence as a viable solution.

Already, Pinellas County is mulling the merits of converting an old elementary school into teacher housing. In Hillsborough, the superintendent is fielding questions from developers about building apartments for teachers above a district parking garage.

Santa Clara, Calif., provides new teachers subsidized housing for up to five years. A community outside Washington, D.C., offers five elementary teachers rent-free housing to teach at troubled schools.

With Florida housing prices showing no sign of tapering off, and state teacher salaries still about \$6,000 below the national average, administrators say easing the housing crunch will become even more crucial in the future.

"We'll face a critical shortage in the next couple of years if we don't do anything," said Wayne Blanton, executive director of the Florida School Boards Association. "We thought housing prices would have cooled by now, but they haven't. And that's bad news."

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Florida needs to hire about 22,000 teachers a year, Blanton said. With an amendment passed by voters in 2002 that limits the number of students in a classroom, Blanton said, districts have to hire another 8,000 teachers a year to fill the new classes.

Florida's universities produce at the most 8,000 teachers a year, Blanton said, so the state must find most of its new hires elsewhere.

At the same time, the uptick in housing prices has made recruiting harder. New hires have quit in Collier and Monroe counties once they found out they couldn't afford to live anywhere near work.

"Our average home is about \$700,000," said Randy Acevedo, Monroe's superintendent. "Meanwhile, we average about \$40,000 for a beginning salary. Our teachers have to wait tables on the weekends to make ends meet. I shake my head. I don't know how they do it."

For 14 years, Linda Diaz has taught elementary grades for Monroe County. She bought her first house 20 miles north of Key West about three years ago, but she needed her husband, sister and mom to help. They all live there.

The mortgage, taxes, homeowner, windstorm and flood insurance cost them about \$3,300 a month. Diaz pulls in about \$60,000 a year with two other jobs.

"It's pretty much paycheck to paycheck," she said. "We've talked about leaving, but this is really our home."

Other longtime teachers are fleeing. Acevedo says teacher turnover has increased nearly 70 percent because of the rise in housing costs.

He says one way to slow the exodus is for the district to supply its own housing. Many schools have property they don't use. Why not lease that to land-starved developers, and require that, in exchange, they build low-rent housing?

"If I could live next to my office, that would be pretty nice," Acevedo said.

Since Florida schools haven't done this type of development before, Acevedo and officials from Collier and Osceola want lawmakers to explicitly allow school property to be used for housing.

David Rice, a Naples developer who wants to build teacher housing, already thinks districts are allowed do it. The Collier School Board has tentatively approved his plan to build apartments over district-owned parking lots with his partner.

The district's attorney wanted state lawmakers to specifically allow school property to be used for housing before that deal gets approved, Rice said.

He expects approval within the next month.

In Osceola, School Board member Tom Greer wants lawmakers to go even further by allowing districts the flexibility of steering public money, including perhaps property taxes, to housing.

"We have 7.5 acres," Greer said. "And it's surrounded by schools. We don't need a school there. But we do need housing."

So Greer is seeking public money to finance housing construction with a private builder.

"It should be a local decision," Greer said. "Right now, it's not."

House Bill 1363, which includes the teacher housing proposals, passed a committee last week. It is still moving through the House, but the ultimate outcome is unclear.

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Pinellas County school superintendent Clayton Wilcox said he endorses a teacher housing plan, which will be discussed by the board at a May 2 workshop.

The St. Petersburg Downtown Partnership pitched the idea earlier this year. It wants the School Board to donate a 1925 elementary school on 2 acres at 1015 10 Ave. N that can no longer be used for classrooms.

Details are sketchy, but the partnership would put the 2 acres into a trust and bid out the land to a developer.

Whoever buys the property would be allowed to build 14 townhomes that sell at about \$170,000 each. The buyer would also have to build nine units in the old school building that would be sold at prices between \$120,000 and \$135,000.

Don Shea, president of the partnership, said conditions would be put on the units to ensure they remain affordable.

Hillsborough Superintendent MaryEllen Elia said teacher housing hasn't reached a crisis level in Tampa yet. It's a growing issue, though, one that could spark a partnership with developers in the future, Elia said.

School Board member Jack Lamb mentioned that the new parking garage at the Rampello K-8 school in downtown could provide an attractive foundation for an apartment tower.

"I've thrown it out as an idea," Lamb said. "They could build four or five stories of affordable housing, and they pay us for air rights. Hopefully, this will bear fruit."

For all the buzz about teachers getting housing assistance, one group that's been mostly silent are the teachers themselves.

The union that represents them, the Florida Education Association, is mostly unimpressed by teacher housing.

"The best solution is to raise salaries," said spokesman Mark Pudlow. "Communities with teachers in low-cost housing isn't an answer."

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