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Commentary: Why affordable housing matters for Orlando



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Orlando has earned its reputation as a top tourist destination. This success is only possible because of the hardworking residents who keep the hospitality industry running, from hotel staff to restaurant workers, ride attendants, healthcare professionals and beyond. These essential employees are the backbone of Central Florida's tourism economy, yet many struggle to find affordable housing in the very communities they serve.

According to the newly released 2026 National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC) Gap Report, Orlando tops the list of worst cities for affordable housing, with only 13 affordable and available rental homes for every 100 extremely low-income renter households. This severe shortage pushes many residents farther from their workplaces, resulting in longer commutes and added burden on already stretched households.

This crisis is not new to our region. Orlando has consistently ranked among the top cities with the most severe shortages of affordable housing since the report began in 2019, only absent from the top 10 in 2021.

When the most vulnerable members of our community pay more than they can afford to put a roof over their heads, they are left with little for other necessities. More than 85% of extremely low-income renters in Orlando are severely cost-burdened, meaning they spend more than half of their income on rent and utilities. Those struggling with housing costs often must make impossible decisions between paying rent and affording food, healthcare or transportation. These are not choices any individual or family should have to make.

The ripple effect of this shortage is far-reaching. In Orlando, there are over 70,000 extremely low-income renter households and only 9,000 affordable rental homes available, creating a deficit of 61,000 units. This reality is forcing families and individuals to live in substandard conditions or pushing them out of their communities.

When people are priced out of their neighborhoods, they are pushed farther away from their jobs, schools and support systems. It also strains local businesses, which struggle to retain workers.

Addressing the affordable housing crisis starts with making housing easier to build. That means removing development barriers, increasing support for affordable housing and bringing public and private partners together to invest in real solutions. When affordable homes are built near jobs, schools and everyday services, families are more stable, businesses can better retain workers and the entire region is stronger.

Local governments play a crucial role in affordable housing development by streamlining the permitting and zoning processes. By removing unnecessary red tape, governments can reduce the time it takes to get housing projects off the ground. Municipalities can also offer incentives, such as tax breaks or infrastructure support, to encourage affordable housing construction. For example, Orange County has expedited its affordable housing permitting process, and its Affordable Housing Trust Fund has helped fund nearly 2,400 housing units between 2000 and 2025.

Local employers must also recognize the role affordable housing plays in the well-being of their workforce and invest in their employees' stability. By supporting affordable housing initiatives or partnering in development projects, businesses can retain talent and reduce turnover.

Many hospitals, airports and utility companies hold surplus land that can be leveraged to help address the affordable housing crisis. These organizations, deeply embedded in the community, are uniquely positioned to give back and create something meaningful. By making surplus land available for affordable development, these institutions can help create much-needed housing, strengthen employee stability and contribute to the health of the region.

These kinds of partnerships represent a long-term vision where businesses are willing to leverage their resources for a greater purpose. Whether it's a healthcare provider looking to house essential staff or an airport seeking ways to support workers, these collaborations can create lasting positive impacts for the entire community.

The future of Central Florida, a region built on diversity and inclusion, depends on how well we take care of our residents. Together, we can ensure everyone has a place to call home and no one has to choose between paying rent and living a healthy, fulfilling life.

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