

# Sarasota business community leaders pushing solutions for affordable housing crisis

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[Affordable housing crisis: Sarasota business leaders push solutions \(heraldtribune.com\)](https://www.heraldtribune.com/story/news/local/2024/04/07/affordable-housing-crisis-sarasota-business-leaders-push-solutions/7288424002/)

Faced with serious labor disruptions caused by a shortage in workforce housing, area business leaders are mobilizing to help ramp up the years-long effort to bring more affordable housing to the region.

Late last month, the board of the Greater Sarasota Chamber of Commerce voted unanimously to back many recommendations on the issue proposed by the region's Affordable Housing Advisory Committee.

For several years, the advisory committee has presented the recommendations to Sarasota city and county elected officials as ways they could work with developers to combat the housing shortage.



The Sarasota Housing Authority is nearing completion on Cypress Square, a three-building, an affordable housing project consisting of 84 units and a clubhouse in the 1800 block of 21st in Sarasota. *Mike Lang*

While steps have been taken on some of the recommendations, housing advocates have continually been turned away on some of the items they think could make the biggest impact. Armed with the Chamber board's seal of approval on the recommendations, business leaders plan to "hit the circuit" and meet with elected officials to ask "How do we get these rolling in our community?" said Chamber CEO Heather Kasten.

## Local Sarasota businesses are impacted by the lack of affordable housing

The move comes on the heels of an Affordable Housing Summit that the Chamber hosted late last year in partnership with several area nonprofits and philanthropic agencies.

While the summit included numerous community leaders among the 250 in attendance, it was largely targeted at local employers. "The nonprofits have known for years this is an issue," Kasten said. "But now that this is impacting the business community, we geared it to them." Highlights included results of recent surveys done by the Chamber, which represents 1,400 area companies that employ more than 60,000 people. Results showed that 73% of local businesses report that the shortage in affordable housing has severely affected their ability to recruit and retain workers.

They also found that 1,500 workers had recently turned down job offers here over housing costs and that more than half of young professionals already working here have considered leaving the area due to high housing expenses. "Some of the young people are commuting over 40 miles a day," Kasten said.

## **Affordable housing recommendations may help alleviate Sarasota's affordable housing crisis**

Also at the summit, members of the Affordable Housing Advisory Committee were on hand to present their 12 recommendations, based on their research and what they found to be “best practices” across the country. The recommendations address the dire need for “affordable” and “workforce” housing – the former often defined as including households at between 80% and 120% of Area Median Income, or AMI, while the latter are those at 60% to 80% AMI, according to housing advocates.

Most of the recommendations – things like incentivizing the development of affordable housing through expediting building permits and reduction of parking requirements – have either been acted upon in some way or make up standard requirements that local governments already need to meet in order to access certain state funds, advocates say.

It was within the twelfth recommendation and its subparts that members of the Affordable Housing Advisory Committee have been making a strong appeal for big action to meet the housing dilemma.

Key among the recommendations is a proposal to create an Affordable Housing Trust Fund using a percentage of property tax growth from new development, which would act as a recurring revenue source to build affordable housing units on a regular basis. The Chamber voted to support that, as long as the trust has clear parameters at the outset on how the funds would be disbursed.

The Chamber board also voted to back the committee’s recommendation for the establishment of a Voluntary Density Bonus Program where developers could build more units per acre providing that at least 12% of the original units are priced as “affordable.” However, the Chamber board declined to support the committee’s recommendation regarding mandatory inclusionary zoning, which would require that a percentage of all units built in designated areas be affordable.

## **Momentum is building in Sarasota to push for more affordable housing solutions**

Kasten said that she is excited that momentum is building on the topic, particularly given the passage this past week by the Sarasota City Commission of a zoning amendment that offers density and height bonuses to developers who build affordable housing along several mixed use major corridors. “There are multiple things happening that are all working toward moving the needle on affordable housing,” Kasten said.

Another Chamber board member encouraged by the momentum and recommendations: businessman Mike Quillen. Quillen, as president of Gecko's Hospitality Group and co-owner of Watershed Hospitality Concepts, oversees fifteen restaurants in the region, including establishments like Gecko's Grill & Pub locations; Dockside Waterfront Grill; Tripletail Seafood & Spirits; and Blase Café in Siesta Key Village.

"We've lost a good number of people who just can't afford to live here," Quillen said of the impact of the worsening housing crunch on employees. That includes everyone from wait staff to upper management, he added. Recruitment is equally challenging, and his businesses are constantly spending money on training due to the high turnover because of housing. He would love to expand and open more establishments in downtown Sarasota if he and his partners could find the workers. "But where are they going to live?" he said.

Still, he's optimistic. "I'm glad to see that instead of talking about this, perhaps we are going to do something about it," Quillen added about the crisis and working with local officials on the recommendations, particularly the trust fund source.

Housing advocates are thrilled as well by the business community's leadership on the crisis – particularly its backing of the recurring funding source idea for the Affordable Housing Trust Fund.

William Russell, president and CEO of the Sarasota Housing Authority and past member of the Affordable Housing Advisory Committee, called it “very encouraging.” He believes many tools are needed in the affordable housing toolbox, including zoning and density bonuses as well as mandatory inclusionary zoning. But the Affordable Housing Trust Fund is at the top. “All that stuff is important, but funding is really key,” he said.

A recurring funding source would help get more ambitious projects off the ground on a regular basis, Russell added, like those being tackled through the \$25 million the county allocated to affordable housing from its share of pandemic relief funds, or \$40 million from HUD hurricane relief. “It would be great to have a renewable source so that we are not just dependent on storm funds that come in from the federal government after a huge storm or a disaster like COVID,” Russell said.

Russell has never experienced this groundswell of community motivation on the topic. After many “rather lonely” years when small cadres of housing advocates would show up at government meetings to raise the alarm, now he's seeing representatives from corporate attorneys and builders, to small business owners, county departments and major employers like Sarasota Memorial Hospital.

All of them share a similar story: the loss of employees or failure to recruit new ones over high housing costs. “The community is feeling the pain, and now everyone is concerned about this, it is affecting everybody,” he said. “If we could get the policymakers to adopt that policy,” Russell added of the funding source, “it would be very, very helpful.”

*This story comes from a partnership between the Sarasota Herald-Tribune and the Community Foundation of Sarasota County. Sandra Amrhein covers the Season of Sharing campaign, along with issues surrounding housing, utilities, childcare and transportation in the area. She can be reached at [samrhein@gannett.com](mailto:samrhein@gannett.com)*