The Miami Herald

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

Miami-Dade told cities to help build housing that local workers can afford. Few did

BY AARON LEIBOWITZ

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Local mayors and community leaders met to discuss the affordability crisis in Miami and the surrounding Florida areas. BY ALIE SKOWRONSKI

Miami-Dade County in 2016 ordered local leaders to take action to encourage development of housing that local workers could afford in their cities. But six years later, most cities still have not complied, according to records obtained by the Miami Herald.

Only four of 23 cities that were required to take steps to address workforce housing needs had complied as of late July — five years after the original deadline, which has been pushed back twice. Another 11 cities with fewer than 10,000 residents are exempt from the county requirements.

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Under the 2016 legislation, cities were required to share evidence with the county that they considered creating workforce housing incentives for developers. They could either show that they put such incentives in place, or issue a finding that building workforce housing in their city would be "impractical."

Among the four cities that had provided information to the county as of late July, two — Miami Lakes and Aventura — issued findings that building workforce housing in their suburban communities would be impractical, citing a lack of available land and the high value of potential development sites.

The Herald identified a total of eight cities in Miami-Dade that offer incentives for developers to build workforce housing. Bay Harbor Islands, Doral, Miami Gardens, North Miami and Sweetwater offer incentives, their city codes show, but they were considered non-compliant with the county program as of last month because they had not submitted the required information.

As Miami-Dade faces a housing affordability crisis, experts said cities' low participation in the workforce housing program shows how local governments have failed to ensure workers aren't priced out of the market.

Workforce housing is typically aimed at workers considered essential, such as teachers, firefighters, retail employees and service workers. It includes homes and apartments that are priced below market level but are more expensive than "affordable housing."

Miami-Dade defines workforce housing as units affordable to those making between approximately $41,000 and $95,000 per year.

"Each municipality has a responsibility to provide for its own citizens and its own economy," said Ned Murray, associate director of Florida International University's Jorge M. Perez Metropolitan Center. "We just don't see that happening to the levels that are necessary."

The County Commission rejected a proposal in 2016 to make workforce units mandatory as part of new multifamily projects, choosing instead to retool a voluntary program that was first created in 2007. In addition to the new requirements for municipalities, the county sought to sweeten incentives for developers in the form of additional density and the deferral of payments to local governments if they agree to build workforce units.

Municipal governments have not been penalized for missing the program's deadlines, said Tere Florin, a spokesperson for the county Department of Regulatory and Economic Resources.

"[T]he municipalities are our partners in providing workforce housing for our residents, and 'enforcement' is the last recourse," Florin said.

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On July 22, the same day Miami-Dade provided records to the Herald about cities' compliance status, the county sent a letter to the mayors and managers of more than a dozen cities.

"I am reaching out to you due to the importance and urgency of the matter," wrote Miami-Dade Planning Development Manager Cindy Hoskin.

The workforce housing program is just one example of cities' reluctance to contribute to Miami-Dade's housing needs. Recently, backlash from municipal leaders resulted in the watering down of a county plan to increase housing density near transit lines, allowing cities to keep full control of their zoning laws and guaranteeing single-family neighborhoods won't be touched.

"You need every community to get on board," said Annie Lord, executive director of nonprofit Miami Homes for All. "There's no way that one government entity can absorb all of that, nor should it."

'IMPRACTICAL' TO PROVIDE WORKFORCE HOUSING?

Miami Lakes, Aventura and Pinecrest each passed resolutions in 2017 saying it wouldn't be feasible to build workforce housing in their cities.

"The City Commission finds that it would be impractical for the City to address workforce housing due to the high value of the remaining land within its territorial jurisdiction," Aventura's resolution said.

Miami-Dade County agreed in its 2016 legislation not to challenge cities' findings.

Murray, the FIU urban planner, said high land values and limited space shouldn't stop municipalities from trying to attract affordable development.

"Provide incentives for developers to help make those numbers work," he said. "There are ways of making affordable housing work even in communities where the land may be more expensive."

A handful of cities have implemented workforce housing programs in recent years. In Miami, officials expanded a low-income housing program in 2015 to include units affordable to those making between 80% and 140% of the area median income.

Sunny Isles Beach passed an ordinance in 2016 to incentivize units affordable to those making below 120% of the area median income, with preference given to city employees.

And in North Bay Village, a tiny bayfront municipality along the JFK Causeway, officials recently began offering density bonuses to developers if 5% of units are designated as affordable for people making between 80% and 100% of the area median. The density bonus gets larger if 10% of units are within that range.

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"If we want to have an operable city and county, we need to make sure we're providing for those who are keeping our cities operating," said Vice Mayor Marvin Wilmoth.

A rendering of the pool deck at Shoma Bay, which will feature the first workforce housing units in North Bay Village. *Shoma Bay*

COUNTY SAYS COLLABORATION IS IMPROVING

Florin, the county spokesperson, said collaboration between Miami-Dade and its 34 local governments is improving. She pointed to a roundtable convened by Miami-Dade Mayor Daniella Levine Cava in May to discuss housing affordability with more than two dozen municipal mayors, and said county staff have since been meeting regularly with city planners.

She also highlighted Levine Cava's initiative to develop and preserve affordable and workforce units.

"Addressing the affordability crisis by strengthening resident protections and increasing available supply is a top priority for Miami-Dade County," Florin said

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Miami-Dade Mayor Daniella Levine Cava on April 8, addressing the affordability crisis in Miami-Dade County. *José A. Iglesias jiglesias@miamiherald.com*

Still, experts said it will take a more aggressive approach to build the tens of thousands of affordable and workforce units the county needs to ease the burden on local workers.

Kevin Greiner, a Miami urban planner and economist, said data on affordability in Miami-Dade tells the story with nearly half of the county's residents paying over 30% of their income on housing — the second-highest rate of any U.S. county behind only the Bronx.

"Clearly," Greiner said, "workforce housing and affordable housing programs haven't worked in Miami-Dade."

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