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## Grimsley Backs Habitat's Drive to Save \$2.5 Million Housing Grant

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State Rep. Denise Grimsley, R-Lake Placid, is backing Habitat for Humanity of Highlands County's drive to save a \$2.5 million housing grant threatened by state budget cuts.

The grant, under the state's Community Workforce Housing Innovation Pilot (CWHIP) program, is the key to financing Habitat's \$6.8 million, 100-townhouse Ridgeview project.

Preliminary approval for the grant was given last year for what would be Habitat's first large-scale, community building project, on 20 acres off Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard just south of Arbuckle Creek Road.

But state budget cuts passed in January's emergency legislative session took \$190 million from the Florida Housing Finance Corporation, the state agency that distributes housing grants.

Habitat's grant is in serious jeopardy, because the deficit-elimination legislation orders FHFC to rescind grant funding that was allocated, but not yet finally awarded, for new housing construction "to the maximum extent feasible."

In a statement to the FHFC board, Grimsley said Highlands County has "more than its fair share of ... substandard housing."

She urged final approval of Habitat's \$2.5 million CWHIP grant as a critical step in meeting the need of working families for affordable housing.

"With the assistance of Habitat for Humanity, the availability of affordable housing is expanding, but not nearly enough to meet the increasing demand," Grimsley said.

Highlands County's percentage of elderly residents ranks No. 1 in the state and second in the nation, Grimsley noted.

"Our hospitals, assisted living facilities, medical offices and home health agencies have an extremely difficult time in finding employees due to our low inventory of affordable housing," she said. "With the assistance of Habitat for Humanity, the availability is increasing but, unfortunately, they can't keep pace with the growing demand."

Grimsley said Habitat has lined up \$2.5 million in financing from a community bank for the 100-townhouse Ridgeview project, but that is dependent on receiving the \$2.5 million CWHIP grant.

Hundreds of families are on Habitat's waiting list, Grimsley said.

"Habitat for Humanity and the Ridgeview Project," Grimsley said, "are these families' only hope at

their chance for a piece of the American dream, home ownership."

Mike Jacobson, executive director, and John Hawthorne, Jr., chief operating officer, of Habitat, pleaded for final award of the CWHIP grant Tuesday before the FHFC board in Tallahassee.

In addition to Grimsley's support, they also presented a petition for the Ridgeview grant signed by more than 2,000 Highlands County residents.

"The first question I asked the panel was, 'Is anything we're about to say going to make a difference in terms of the decision.'" Jacobson said. "And the answer I got is that they are taking in all information, and anything is possible.

"So, it's not a yes, and it's not a no, it's a soft maybe. We will get a definite answer when their board meets again on March 13."

Jacobson argued for awarding the grant not only as a means of helping working-class families, but also as "an extraordinary economic revitalization opportunity."

"I read in your paper that only one building permit (for a home) was issued in this county in January," he said. "Well, here's an opportunity to kick start the local economy, to put a lot of people to work building homes and put a lot of people into homes."

While Habitat keeps its home prices low through volunteer labor, the non-profit agency still employs many skilled trades people and buys materials locally for each home building project, he said.

In addition to a \$6.8 million shot in the arm to the local building industry, Jacobson said, putting 100 families into Ridgeview townhouses will also stimulate consumer spending.

"The average Habitat customer is currently paying \$750 for rent," he said. "When they go into a Habitat home they're paying an average of a \$450 monthly mortgage. That's \$300 in disposable income every month that goes into the local economy in one way or another."

Seventy-five people have qualified and are waiting to purchase a Habitat home, and 265 are on a waiting list to apply, Jacobson said.

With the CWHIP grant, he said, 100 families buying a Ridgeview townhouse would switch from "a crippling rental situation to a healthy home ownership situation. And that is 'Business 101' for building a healthy community."