

Land Trust should have acted sooner

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The Bahama Conch Community Land Trust is now officially rudderless.

Norma Jean Sawyer, who helped launch the nonprofit years ago and was its executive director, has been laid off.

Finances have been in bad shape before and an audit of its books, ordered by a skeptical Key West City Commission, will likely reveal just how bad.

But the situation became so dire, the Land Trust can no longer afford to pay Sawyer to run the nonprofit. And without some rescue effort, it's doubtful it can remain viable.

If the Land Trust is to survive, it must formally break with Sawyer and move in a new direction with a new board willing to take up the tough work that lies ahead.

When the Florida Housing Finance Corp. earlier this year pulled the plug on \$1.14 million in state funding slated for the Land Trust, that's when the board needed to step in and act.

It didn't.

Instead, it sat by while Sawyer led an angry public attack on District 6 Commissioner Clayton Lopez and then-mayor Morgan McPherson, blaming them for the Land Trust's troubles.

City elections last month proved further evidence of how Sawyer worked behind the scenes in an effort to unseat Lopez and elect James Marquardt, former president of the Land Trust board, to that seat.

Well, Lopez won 72 percent of the vote in that district, and surely then the board could read the handwriting on the wall?

No, board members continued with a head-in-the-sand approach that now leaves them -- and the mission of the Land Trust -- in a precarious position.

The audit of their books -- ordered by the City Commission in May -- will likely uncover more problems.

But the board should have stepped in when the state funding was lost. The conflicts of interest reported then included tenants in trust-subsidized housing who earned too much to qualify. One of those tenants was Sawyer's son, Adrian Poitier. Only nine of the 34 tenants then living in Land Trust housing qualified.

And just last month, city auditors discovered the trust let wind and flood insurance lapse on at least six homes -- putting those residents at risk, along with the trust's assets.

The state Housing Finance Corp. also criticized the trust for conflicts in Sawyer hiring her son to do construction work, paid for with trust money that comes from a special city taxing district levy.

Since 2001, the Land Trust has received \$2.5 million from the city for rehabilitation of rental and for-sale properties in the historic district.

For that kind of money, the taxpayers in District 6 should demand more. Without a wholesale restructuring, we don't see how the Land Trust can -- or should -- survive.