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Orlando Sentinel
OPINION

GUEST COLUMNIST

Legislature must stop interfering with local efforts to stabilize rents

In what has become an annual tradition, the Florida Legislature is poised to further restrict citizens' freedom to address issues affecting our local communities. In fact, they are taking a sledgehammer to local freedom amid the worst housing crisis in our lifetimes.

Senate President Kathleen Passidomo (District 28) is pushing Senate Bill 102, which bans local ordinances capping rent increases despite the fact that an overwhelming majority of Florida voters favor limits on rent gouging. A poll coordinated by Local Progress Impact Lab and conducted by the African American Research Collaborative (AARC) of Florida voters ahead of last year's election found 8 in 10 voters favor state action to reduce rent increases and showed wide, bipartisan support for local initiatives addressing this issue. Housing affordability registered greater concern from voters than any other issue, aside from overall inflation.

Meanwhile, the human toll from Florida's escalating housing emergency is already staggering. More than a quarter of voters polled said they had recently experienced homelessness due to skyrocketing housing costs, or near homelessness such as being forced to sleep in their car or on a friend's couch. Housing instability profoundly affects our lives, families, communities and economies. If state lawmakers aren't going to do something about it themselves, they should at least stop interfering with local efforts to address this crisis.

In response to the growing concerns from community members directly impacted by rent increases, I led Orange County's effort to place a rent stabilization ordinance before voters on last year's ballot, a common-sense initiative blocked by state lawmakers and powerful special interests who place their own financial gain ahead of safe and secure housing — an essential human need — for our residents. Despite millions in misleading attack ads backed by corporate interests opposing the measure, the initiative easily passed with nearly 59% of the vote, but the result was never certified



By Emily Bonilla

after legal challenges from Florida Realtors and the Florida Apartment Association — the lobbying arms of big real-estate interests and wealthy corporate landlords. Their argument relied on a 1977 state statute that requires a formal housing emergency declaration before any rent control ordinance is allowed on the ballot. While we await the Florida Supreme Court's decision on

whether to hear the case on rent stabilization, the Legislature seeks to thwart local democracy. Orange County residents, families and communities are still suffering as a result.

Since Ron DeSantis took office, homeowners in our state have been paying three times the national average for property insurance while the governor and his allies continue to side with the industry over everyday Floridians. Utility rates continue to climb and people who live in condos are paying as much as 50% more for insurance than the national average.

Passidomo's housing proposal has some worthwhile provisions. Notably, it provides incentives for investments in affordable housing, including for seniors, military members and young adults aging out of foster care. It also directs more funding to various state housing programs. But blocking local initiatives on rent increases is a poison pill that should be stripped from the bill.

Everyone deserves the freedom to know that with hard work, they will be able to pay for an affordable place to live. But by seeking to take away the freedom to address skyrocketing rents at the local level, politicians have again favored corporate donors and lobbyists ahead of the hardworking people they were elected to serve. Floridians and their families deserve better from their elected officials.

Emily Bonilla is an Orange County commissioner and a member of Local Progress, a movement of local elected officials advancing a racial and economic justice agenda through all levels of local government.

GUEST COLUMNIST

DeSantis, Legislature need to address water-quality challenges

As Florida continues to wisely invest in high-profile environmental initiatives such as the restoration of The Everglades and the Indian River Lagoon, the governor and the Legislature should remember Tampa Bay and other bodies of water also desperately need more attention.

To their credit, Gov. Ron DeSantis and state lawmakers have made The Everglades and Indian River Lagoon top priorities. The governor recently announced plans for \$100 million a year in water quality projects for the Indian River Lagoon to help collect and treat stormwater runoff. The Everglades' restoration efforts are expected to get additional billions in the coming years.

While those restoration projects are essential, other bodies of water around the state should not be ignored. State legislators could take a significant step this spring toward making sure key waterways all around Florida get the appropriate attention by requiring the state to develop Basin Management Action Plans for each of them. We need those basin plans for Tampa Bay, Sarasota Bay and so many more water bodies — from Pensacola Bay and Apalachicola Bay in the Panhandle to Biscayne Bay in South Florida.

At the same time, we need to implement recommendations to improve water quality that already exist. The state's Blue-Green Algae Bloom Task Force has provided useful recommendations that would reduce the impact of excessive nutrients on fueling harmful algae blooms. Now, the governor and the Legislature should put those recommendations into state law and see that they are carried out.

Why is it so important to create these plans and see them through?

Water quality is key to our tourist-based economy, our quality of life



By Jon Paul Brooker



and the preservation of our overall environment. And Floridians know all too well what happens when water quality suffers. For example, Florida's manatee population has declined by 25% over just the past two years, and the main cause is poor water quality killing their food source.

Simultaneously, we need to work harder to continue to change the public's attitude toward plastics and other marine debris that pollute our beaches and waterways and endanger

our marine life. Balloons are among the most common items found on beaches during the International Coastal Cleanup. Floridians are now allowed to release up to nine balloons; the Legislature should ban any release of balloons.

Another effective way to protect the health of our beaches and waterways would be for the Legislature to again allow local governments to ban single-use plastics — or approve a statewide ban. This is an enormous economic issue because the health of our beaches and our waterways is directly tied to the health of our economy.

It's important for the governor and the Legislature to make restoration of The Everglades and the Indian River Lagoon a priority. But we need to do more this spring to create the paths to improving water quality and protecting beaches throughout Florida — and we can start by banning balloon releases and single-use plastics.

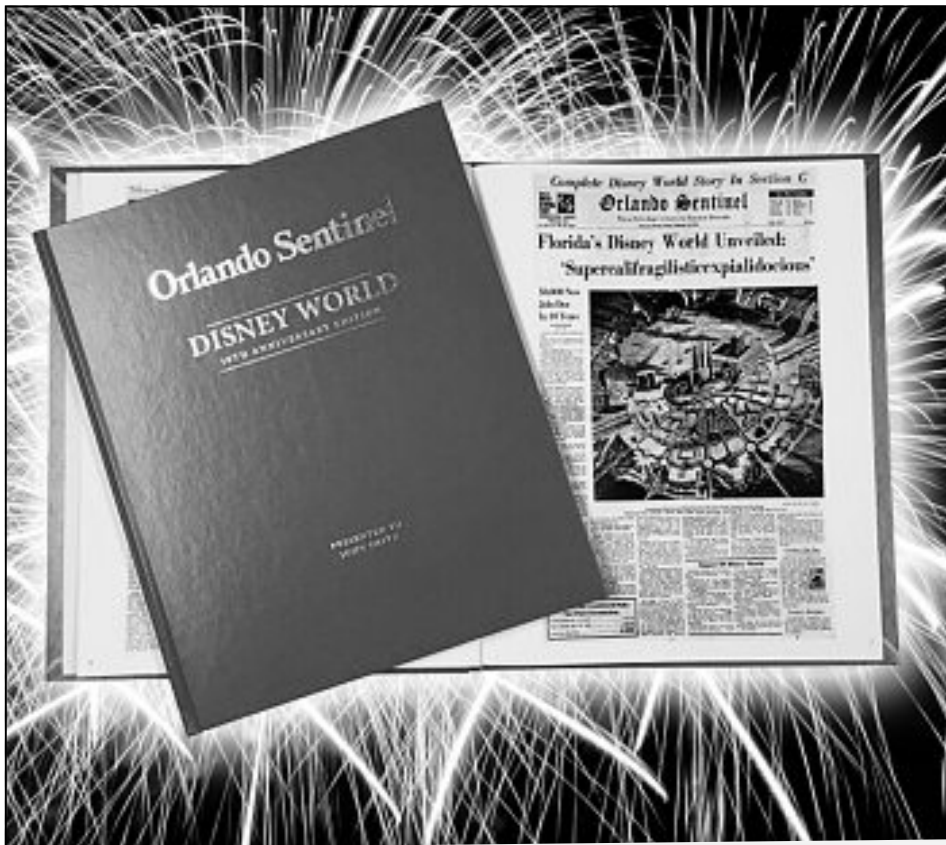
Jon Paul "J.P." Brooker of St. Petersburg is the director of Florida Conservation and an attorney for Ocean Conservancy.

This op-ed was originally published in the Tallahassee Democrat, which is a member of The Invading Sea media collaborative. The collaborative focuses on the threats posed to Florida by the warming climate.

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PUBLIC NOTICE

CHULUOTA ROAD RCA - BCC PUBLIC HEARING
MARCH 7, 2023

Orange County is moving forward with a Roadway Conceptual Analysis (RCA) for the widening of Chuluota Road from Colonial Drive (State Road 50) to Lake Pickett Road. The planned improvements would create a four-lane divided roadway within the project limits.

A Public Hearing will be held before the Orange County Board of County Commissioners (BCC) on Tuesday, March 7, 2023, at 9 a.m. (or shortly thereafter) at the Orange County Commission Chambers, 201 S. Rosalind Ave., Orlando, FL 32801. The public will have an opportunity to provide comments.

Public participation is solicited without regard to race, color, national origin, age, sex, religion, disability, income or family status.

Persons who require language translation or interpretive services, which are provided at no cost, should contact Yvette Best, Orange County Title VI/Nondiscrimination coordinator, at 407-836-5825 or Yvette.Best@ocfl.net at least seven (7) days prior to the meeting. Persons requiring accommodations

under the American with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) may request assistance from Nicola Norton, County ADA coordinator, at 407-836-6568 or nicola.norton@ocfl.net at least seven (7) days prior to the meeting.

Learn more on the project website at www.chuluotarca.com or on the Orange County website at www.ocfl.net.

For more information, please contact:
Blanche Hardy, P.G., Project Manager
Orange County Planning,
Environmental and Development
Services Department
Transportation Planning Division.
407-836-0257 or
blanche.hardy@ocfl.net

What: BCC Public Hearing
Where: Orange County Commission Chambers
When: 9 a.m. (or shortly thereafter)



Chuluota Road RCA -
Audiencia pública BCC
7 de marzo de 2023 a las 9 a.m.
Junta de Comisionados del Condado de Orange
201 S. Rosalind Ave.,
Orlando, FL 32820
Para información en español, póngase en contacto con:
Esther Fernández, Ingeniera II
Departamento de Obras
Públicas del Con-dado de Orange
División de Ingeniería
407-836-7982
o Esther.Fernandez@ocfl.net