Editorial: Ensuring local housing is affordable

A lack of affordable housing illustrates the inequalities that exist in Gainesville.

As low-income families compete for limited housing subsidies, upscale housing complexes compete to attract the most affluent University of Florida students. New complexes offer amenities such as high-end appliances, hot tubs and even a lazy river.

Our community is hardly unique in Florida, which a report this year found to be the nation's toughest market for renters. The problem shows the need to maintain funding for state and federal housing assistance that some lawmakers are seeking to deplete. On a local level, issues such as wages and regulations deserve increased attention in preparation for the Alachua County Commission's Feb. 16 affordable housing summit.

Studies have shown Gainesville has wide disparities that mean more than half of households don't make enough to cover housing and other basic expenses. Two recent stories in The Sun focused on the housing part of the problem, finding more than 21,500 households here pay more than 30 percent of their incomes for rent.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development sets the 30 percent threshold as the point at which housing costs become a burden. HUD considers $877 a fair-market value for a modest two-bedroom rental in Gainesville. A report by UF's Shimberg Center for Housing Studies found that rate would leave out many local median-wage workers such as firefighters, preschool teachers, construction laborers and pharmacy technicians.

The pool area of the Social 28 apartment complex on Southwest 13th Street. The 28 in the name comes from the apartments being 28 steps from UF. Doug Finger / Staff Photographer

Yet more than 2,500 units of even more expensive apartments are under construction here, while hundreds of families are unable get one of just 1,280 housing vouchers available. The Gainesville Housing Authority needed only 20 minutes for 400 families to fill its waiting list for those vouchers when it was opened to applicants in June.

Part of the solution is not backtracking on the limited housing assistance available. As Anne Ray of the Shimberg Center told The Sun, the latest plans in the U.S. House and Senate would decimate a housing program that provides grants to local governments.

On the state level, lawmakers must not raid the Sadowski trust funds as has been done in the past and is being proposed again by the governor. The trust funds pay for affordable housing assistance such as money to help first-time homeowners and rehabilitate housing for seniors and other at-risk populations.

We must also ensure local government is providing the right incentives to increase affordable housing. The Standard, one of the high-end housing complexes being built near campus, was given millions in infrastructure assistance from the city even after backing away from affordable housing commitments.

Local regulations also deserve another look. As county Growth Management Director Steve Lachnict told The Sun, changes to the county Comprehensive Plan in the past decade "promote and encourage" affordable housing but don't strictly require it. While land-use regulations encourage higher-density development, that can lead to more high-end condos rather than affordable rentals.

Wages are another part of the problem. Local efforts to increase the minimum wage paid by public employers might have a cascading effect on private companies, but more need to be done to attract and keep employers paying quality wages.

Our community must remain affordable for the people who fight our fires, teach our kids and other employees who keep local businesses running, as well as the university students who are out-priced by the high-end developments sweeping the market.

A lack of affordable housing is a huge and complex problem without easy solutions, but the upcoming summit must be the start of doing more as a community to address the issue.