

## Roberts, Santiago trade jobs in debate

### ELECTION 2020

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DAYTONA BEACH — What could have easily become a stodgy back-and-forth in a debate between candidates for tax collector escalated into a spirited exchange between Will Roberts and David Santiago at The News-Journal on Monday night.

Roberts, a supervisor in the county revenue office, and Santiago, a state representative in the Florida House, are each vying to become Volusia County's first tax collector in 50 years, the outcome of which will be decided in an open election Aug. 18.

But of all the county races being held in 2020, the race for the county's next tax collector might be the most unusual.

That's because the county doesn't actually have a tax collector — yet.

Florida voters passed See **DEBATE, A8**



**David Santiago, left, debated Will Roberts at The Daytona Beach News-Journal on Monday. Election Day for the new tax collector takes place Aug. 18. [NEWS-JOURNAL/NIGEL COOK]**

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## DEBATE

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Amendment 10 in 2018, with 63.15% of the vote. Among other things, it called for the election of all constitutional offices, including tax collector — a position the county hasn't had since 1971. Under the county's charter, passed by vote in 1970, the duties of the tax collector position had fallen under the responsibilities of the appointed county manager through the county's revenue division.

That could change, depending on how the court rules.

For now, the county mainly services property tax, tag and title, tourist development tax and business tax receipts. The evolved tax collection office would also take on driver's licenses, birth certificates and concealed weapons licenses, once Amendment 10 takes effect Jan. 5.

In the meantime, Roberts and Santiago are in it to win it. The job is expected to pay \$144,000 annually.

## **The candidates**

Roberts, 45, has worked for Volusia County for most of the past 16 years.

Since 2015, he has been the administrative coordinator and tax supervisor for the county's revenue office in DeLand. He's served as a tax collection representative and a field collections manager for the revenue office and from 2007 to 2013. He also was a Volusia County Corrections officer. Roberts served in the Air Force from 1993 to 2000 as an F-15 avionics specialist. He and his wife, Jennifer, have two children and live in New Smyrna Beach.

David Santiago, 49, has represented the 27th district in the Florida House of Representatives for the past eight years and also works as a financial manager.

He is chair of the Gaming Control Subcommittee, and served on the Commerce Committee, the Ways and Means Subcommittee, the Energy and Utilities subcommittee, and the Pre-K-12 Innovation Subcommittee.

Santiago was in the Army Reserves from 1988 to 1996 and is a former Deltona city commissioner. He lives in Deltona with his wife, Emma, and their three children.

Both candidates agreed that Volusia County should drop its challenge to the implementation of Amendment 10 if the county loses the appeal to the First District Court of Appeal. They also agreed they'd both really like to see the court rule sooner than the August primary.

## **The cash flow**

As of Monday, campaign finance documents show Santiago's \$43,300 in campaign contributions is more than double that of Roberts' \$19,420 war chest.

Approximately \$33,000 of Santiago's funding comes from political action committees and auto tag agencies, and about 80% of contributions come from outside Volusia County. Much of Roberts' contributions originate with area business owners and individual contributors.

## **The debate**

The debate to give Volusia County voters a chance to meet the first two candidates for tax collector in a half century was held in the newspaper's conference room with social distancing measures in place because of coronavirus concerns. Editor Pat Rice moderated the debate.

Streamed via Facebook Live, the discussion started out with Roberts and Santiago contesting what qualities are most required for the job — both agree experience is needed, but they disagree on what type. Roberts pressed that his time in the county's revenue division was invaluable while Santiago claimed his political leadership was the type needed for the post.

Then, the mood began to simmer when Roberts questioned Santiago's ability to manage employees.

“How is he going to evaluate employees when he doesn't have the tax collection experience to know what to expect from employees,” Roberts asked.

Santiago shot back, claiming Roberts embellished his management title in the revenue office, holding a piece of paper in the air.

“This is a copy of the most recent evaluation from the county personnel office,. It's got (Roberts') name on it. Title says administrative coordinator,” said Santiago. “That's not a title of an individual that evaluates employees.”

Roberts accused Santiago of downplaying his role in the office.

“I'm a Florida certified assistant tax collector,” said Roberts. “He's downplaying my lead role. I'm the property tax lead. I'm responsible for more than \$680 million in revenue annually. I bill it, I collect it, then it gets distributed to the appropriate taxing authorities and levying authorities. By the way, there's 47 taxing authorities in Volusia County for the 2019 tax year. There's 171 levying authorities.”

Santiago shot back at another point, asking social media viewers, “If you were a private investor, investing your own money into an endeavor and you had to pick a CEO to run it for you, would you pick a CEO, potentially someone who's had success in the past of managing and running organizations, or would you pick someone that's been in a cubicle all their life and never led people on any significant level?”

Roberts responded later by laying out documentation claiming Santiago had been delinquent on his taxes, failed to attain tax receipts for his business and had gone through a foreclosure in 2008.

“He can't even follow the own rules that he'll be enforcing,” said Roberts.

“Well, he got real personal there,” replied Santiago.

Santiago said his businesses did suffer over the real estate bubble, but said he started two businesses after recovering from the shortfall and made them work.

“We have our falls, and how we get back up, and how we demonstrate going forward is what defines us,” said Santiago.

“This is not the first time he's went low, and attacked,” said Santiago. “Over the most recent weeks he's been describing me or trying to correlate me to the Seminole County tax collector that's proven to be a corrupt individual... I take personal offense to that.”