

Pointed questions get strong answers from Collier commission candidates

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NAPLES — Russell Kish, Democrat candidate for Collier County commissioner, showed new life Friday during a forum, sounding off on his opponent's fundraising, county spending and funding for the district he is running for.

Kish is running against incumbent Commissioner Jim Coletta for the county's District 5 seat, which represents most of eastern Collier.

The Collier County League of Women Voters held a the forum — which will rerun Sunday afternoon on Collier's television channel 11 — in commission chambers asking pointed questions.

Asked to name his top three priorities for the county, Kish said job retention, more fiscal control and helping keep people in their homes. That should be first, before the county tries to buy Pepper Ranch as conservation and recreation land, he said. The county has \$6 million of the \$27 million needed to buy the ranch, but where's the rest going to come from, Kish asked. And why does Collier County have Miami contractors out on U.S. 41 East to manicure the medians. Why isn't the county using a local firm, he asked.

Coletta said everything relates back to the economy.

"This is a very trying time for our residents," he said, and to that end, the commission cut \$80 million off its budget. "First and foremost, we have to take the burden off our residents."

Coletta noted that's he's a great supporter of the local economy, and the county just passed a local vendor preference ordinance.

Kish took advantage of the moderator's questions to point out that most of Coletta's \$82,500 in contributions came from outside his district, whereas Kish chose not to fundraise, and made a loan to himself of some \$570.

Kish said he understands that most of District 5 is composed of working-class people and not many businesses so contributions would have to come from other areas. He questioned what accepting outside funds says about one's commitment to his district, and his philosophy, in general.

Answering a question about stimulating the economy by freezing impact fees, Coletta said he's already putting together a coalition to look at several options.

Kish said Collier's growth "isn't anywhere near where it needs to be," and a tax rollback might be more appropriate.

"We need to work with what we have," Kish said. The county government should work within fiscal guidelines based on the money it has, he said.

On the issue of the ongoing litigation between Collier commissioners and Collier Clerk of Courts Dwight Brock, Kish said he looked at Brock's credentials as an attorney and fiscal manager and said he likely knows what he's doing, and is doing so within the guidelines of what the law allows.

"I know there's a power struggle going on," Kish said. "I just can't find what the real battle is about."

Coletta called Brock "an entity out there running amok," and said he has exceeded his authority by spending money from the commission's interest account.

"We're spending millions of dollars (on litigation) because the clerk will not settle the case," Coletta said.

Asked if District 5 gets enough resources, Coletta said it gets plenty, but Kish disagreed.

At the end of the debate, Coletta went for Kish's jugular, staring directly at the camera, asking voters if they really want someone on the dais who has never served the public in anyway.

Kish is a pharmacist with NCH Downtown Naples Hospital. Coletta is seeking his third term as a commissioner.

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