

From: Maybank, Burnet R. III <BMaybank@nexsenpruet.com>
To: Maybank, Burnet R. III BMaybank@nexsenpruet.com
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Subject: SALT LS: Lots of talk re tax collections in primary race for Treasurer

PRIMARY ELECTION: RICHLAND COUNTY TREASURER

June primary features rare race for Richland treasurer

By DAWN HINSHAW

dhinshaw@thestate.com

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Richland Treasurer David Adams said he's made it easier for people to pay their taxes. So each of the past three years, Adams said, fewer people faced the possibility that the county might sell their property for non-payment of taxes.

On June 10, Adams faces his first challenger since 2002 in Democrat Joe McEachern II. If that name sounds familiar, it might be because he is the son of a state legislator.

Barring the unexpected, the winner will take office, since no Republican filed.

While Adams touts his record in office, McEachern is pushing hot buttons by suggesting the treasurer's office plays a role in the decline of neighborhoods when homes are sold for non-payment of taxes and absentee landlords step in.

The county treasurer is paid an annual salary of \$112,415 and supervises 30 employees who process 500,000 property-tax bills a year. Here, a look at the candidates:

David Adams

Adams was information director for state Treasurer Grady Patterson before winning the county treasurer's job in 2002 by defeating an incumbent.

Under his leadership, Richland County became the first county in the Midlands to coordinate the issuance of motor vehicle license-plate decals with payment of county property taxes. The practice speeds the re-licensing process for the car owner and saves taxpayers more than \$60,000 a year, Adams said.

But one of the most important things Adams said he's done is make himself available to answer questions from taxpayers who may have no other involvement with county government. About 13,000 people come in to his office each month, he said; another 4,000 people call. "When you have emergency situations, we'll find a way to get you through that in a day or two, not eight weeks," he said.

His office instituted a policy allowing installment payments – the only county that does, he said, because it's complicated to monitor. But Adams said it has helped reduce by nearly one-third the number of people who couldn't cover an annual tax bill in a single payment.

In the first year of the program, 2003-04, 300 people paid their taxes in installment payments. This past year, 3,100 people did.

As a result, Adams said, the number of properties sent to delinquent tax sales declined by 32 percent in the past three years – from more than 2,200 in 2010 to fewer than 1,500 in 2013. The economy helped, too, he said.

Adams is requesting the county open a satellite office in Northeast Richland. Doing so would cost an estimated \$110,000 a year in salaries for a staff of three to four people. But the expansion is inevitable, Adams said, since 35 percent of county property-tax payers have Northeast zip codes. "I'm the only one who has a history of qualifications for this job," he said. "What we've done in and around the community is proof of that. We're taking it in the right direction."

Joe McEachern II

If elected, McEachern said he would adopt a policy used by Florence County, which gives family members the opportunity to buy a piece of property the county is selling to recoup taxes – an option that’s used just once or twice a year, the treasurer there said, but that keeps family property from automatically passing into other hands.

“My main agenda is restoring our communities ... and holding everything on an even playing field,” McEachern said. “Right now, we could be doing better.” McEachern said people in some Richland County communities are plagued by vacant homes that get sold for non-payment of taxes, are gobbled up by real estate investors, handled by absentee landlords and become an eyesore.

At the same time, McEachern said, “there are a lot of companies not paying their business taxes.” “Let’s fairly collect taxes,” he said. “If we’re going to be hard on residential taxes, let’s be equally aggressive on business taxes.”

He said 35 percent of businesses fall behind in paying their property taxes, with at least one company racking up \$640,000 in back taxes. Adams disputed the figure McEachern said was owed the county, saying the company went bankrupt in 2011 and paid its back taxes.

McEachern used two news events to illustrate why he says Adams needs to keep politics out of his office.

In 2010, McEachern said his rival was forced to apologize for confirming that a candidate for mayor was behind on his taxes – a statement that proved wrong once the auditor’s office updated its records months later.

McEachern also said Adams should have required his deputy director to take a leave of office or resign when she ran against the auditor in 2011. Adams said the woman did take a month of leave.

The race for treasurer

The June 10 primary apparently decides the treasurer’s election, since both candidates are Democrats and no Republican has filed for office.

David Adams

Occupation: County treasurer Age: 43 Family: Wife Pamela Adams and three children; two enrolled at Meadowfield Elementary and one a pre-schooler Neighborhood: Hampton neighborhoods behind the VA hospital Education: 1994 bachelor’s degree in history, The Citadel Previously elected: Treasurer since 2003 Endorsements include: Sen. Darrell Jackson, Sheriff Leon Lott, Bernice Scott, Kit Smith, Mayor Steve Benjamin

Joe McEachern II

Occupation: Owner of a marketing firm Age: 30 Family: Single Neighborhood: North Columbia Education: 2006 bachelor’s degree in business administration, Lander University Previously elected: None Endorsements include: Rep. Leon Howard, Rep. Joe Neal, Auditor Paul Brawley, Rep. Mia McLeod, Richland County Councilman Torrey Rush

Read more here: <http://www.thestate.com/2014/05/13/3444949/june-primary-features-rare-race.html#storylink=cpy>

Burnet R. Maybank, III

Nexsen Pruet, LLC
1230 Main Street, Suite 700 (29201)
P.O. Drawer 2426
Columbia, SC 29202
T: 803.540.2048, F: 803.253.8277
Cell: 803.960.3024
bmaybank@nexsenpruet.com
www.nexsenpruet.com

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