TALLAHASSEE —

Republican Mitt Romney’s supporters said Thursday they are freshly energized – while Democrats downplayed President Obama’s lackluster showing in the first presidential debate and promised better in upcoming showdowns.

Florida Republican Chairman Lenny Curry said he knew his favorite was doing well when toward the end of Wednesday night’s 1 ½-hour debate at the University of Denver he received a text message from a business associate in his Jacksonville hometown.

“The guy’s not political,” Curry said. “But he told me he wants to give to Romney. That says something to me.”

Heading into the contest, polls showed Obama leading Romney in Florida and most battleground states, where the fight to reach the needed 270 electoral votes will be won. A faltering performance by Romney was widely seen as potentially fatal to his candidacy.

Talk already swirled that Republican donors might abandon the White House bid as unwinnable, and turn their cash toward more competitive House and Senate races.

“But the narrative that Obama has this thing sewed up has been stopped in its tracks,” Curry said.

Curry also acknowledged that a stronger showing from the top of the ticket could lift Republican Connie Mack IV in his race against Democratic U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson. Mack has been trailing Nelson in most voter surveys, sometimes by double-digit margins.

Instant polls by CNN and CBS News following the debate declared Romney the winner – with uncommitted voters surveyed by CBS favoring the Republican by two-to-one.
Hard to gauge, though, is whether Romney moved enough voters to his side, and whether they will stay. Two more presidential debates are scheduled for this month, the last on Oct. 22 at Lynn University in Boca Raton.

Democrats, apparently, are already looking ahead, with the Obama camp shrugging off the effects of Romney’s showing.

“He may win the Oscar for his performance last night, but he’s not going to win the presidency on his performance last night,” said Obama strategist David Axelrod.

But Axelrod conceded that changes would be coming before the two candidates next share a stage, Oct. 16, at New York’s Hofstra University. He wouldn’t be pinned down, however, on whether more debate preparation and a tougher tone toward the challenger would be part of the retooling.

“(Obama) made a choice last night to answer the questions that were asked, and to talk to the American people about what we need to do to move forward,” Axelrod said.

He added, “Obviously, we’re going to take a hard look at this and we’re going to have to make some judgments about where to draw the line in these debates and use our time.”

Axelrod said, “It’s like a playoff in sports…. You evaluate after every contest and you make adjustments and I’m sure that we will make adjustments.”

First presidential debates have not lately been a strong predictor of election outcomes.

In 2000, George W. Bush gained a lead in polls over Al Gore that he maintained even as the vice-president wound up winning the popular vote that year.

Four years later, Bush stumbled badly in his first debate with Massachusetts Sen. John Kerry, allowing the Democrat to turn the race into a virtual dead heat before the president eventually pulled away.

“Gov. Romney deserves credit for being well-prepared, focused and warm in the debate,” said former Florida Democratic U.S. Sen. Bob Graham, himself a presidential candidate in 2004. “I think that many people would have come to the conclusion that he won the debate.”

Graham, however, said it’s too early to tell whether that changes the course of the campaign.

“The test is going to come in the next few days, when we see how much that victory has changed the attitude of voters and who they’re going to vote for,” he added.

Brett Doster, a senior adviser to the Romney campaign in Florida, said, “We’re expecting it to be closer here. But we know that we have a lot of clock left.”
Obama was seen by many as missing an opportunity to challenge Romney on his leadership of the investment firm, Bain Capital.

Also bypassed was any attempt to hold Romney accountable for his fundraising comment – captured on hidden videotape at a Boca Raton estate – that almost half the country are “victims” of government dependency.

Romney ridiculed Obama for failing to spark the nation’s economy, underscoring his central theme by using the word “jobs” 23 times in the debate, to the president’s 14 times. But with both men relying on a cascade of statistics to make points about health care, Social Security and budget matters, the exchange was clearly more wonky than warlike.

That, Graham liked.

“The debate on both sides was much more substantive and less negative than the campaign has been today,” Graham said. “That’s what the American people deserve.”

But Florida Atlantic University communications professor David Williams said the two candidates probably confused voters. Whether they convinced many is — so far — unknown.

“If there isn’t clarity, it may come down to impressions. Did one candidate look more energetic than the other? But if you’re an undecided voter, you probably weren’t sitting through this debate,” Williams said.

Steve Siebold, a Boynton Beach-based speech consultant to corporations, said that from his vantage point, neither candidate stood out.

Although Romney is credited with winning, Siebold said the Massachusetts governor missed several chances to tout his resume and private-sector success.

Also, debates like Wednesdays that end without a “zinger” – a memorable line that gets repeated by pundits in coming days – can be easily forgotten by voters, Siebold said.

“Obama seemed like he came in with the advice, ‘don’t lose.’” But Romney needed a home run, and I frankly didn’t see that,” Siebold said.