Seven Floridians get main-stage moment at GOP convention

By John Kennedy

Palm Beach Post Capital Bureau

TAMPA —

Seven leading Florida Republicans get a turn on the main stage at the GOP National Convention this week — each sent from the wings with a different mission, but each facing similar questions.

Will the speech be a “Wow”?

Or a “Bleh”?

“It’s a great opportunity for all of us, and for our state,” said Sharon Day, Republican National Committee co-chair, who is slated to take the stage this afternoon, to help open the storm-delayed convention.

“I think those watching are going to see that we’re real people. All of us. But there’s going to be a different challenge for each person going out there,” added Day, of Fort Lauderdale.

Day will be followed by Tampa Mayor Bob Buckhorn and host committee Chairman Al Austin, also of Tampa, on an opening day capped by the convention’s formal roll-call nomination of Mitt Romney and a speech by the candidate’s wife, Ann.

Former Gov. Jeb Bush, Attorney General Pam Bondi, U.S. Senate nominee Connie Mack IV and Sen. Marco Rubio also will each get 15 minutes of fame – more or less – before the 4,411 delegates and alternates crowding the Tampa Bay Times Forum.

Bush has been moved into a more prominent spot in the revamped schedule – joining Mack and Rubio in speaking on Thursday, the convention’s final night, in advance of Romney’s speech accepting the GOP nomination.

Gov. Rick Scott has apparently been scratched from the lineup, with Tropical Storm Isaac commanding his attention. Scott had been scheduled to speak Monday night.
“Floridians are getting to see Rick Scott at his best right now,” Florida Republican Party Chairman Lenny Curry said Monday.

Asked if Scott could have burnished his image with a strong speech supporting Romney, Curry said that was a tough call.

“The message he was going to deliver is a message Floridians need to hear...we’ve begun to turn the economy around under his leadership,” he said. “It would have resonated. And we’d be in much better shape if we had Mitt Romney as a partner.”

With an expected 15,000 journalists in the mix, along with wall-to-wall cable television and more limited network coverage, Florida’s top Republicans have a chance to both sell the Romney-Paul Ryan ticket and fuel their own political futures with a good performance.

Or, they can be a memorable flop.

Either way, the speeches will likely prove mostly predictable. They’ll drive home what Republicans say is a sharp contrast between the past four years under President Obama and a projected sunny future with Romney in the White House.

In the rejiggered schedule, Floridians are a big part of the message-making.

Bondi will now speak Wednesday evening – a lead-up to running mate Ryan’s address to the convention.

Rubio has the central role of introducing Romney.

Although passed over the vice-presidential spot, Rubio has campaigned hard for Romney, and his son of Cuban immigrants’ story is important for a GOP struggling to pull Hispanic voters to its side.

At a recent appearance last week in West Palm Beach, Rubio also embraced the Romney-Ryan ticket’s push to revamp Medicare – a potentially tough sell in senior-rich Florida, the largest of the nation’s toss-up states.

“All anyone who is in favor of leaving Medicare the way it is right now for everyone is in favor of bankrupting it,” Rubio told the Forum Club of the Palm Beaches.

A rousing speech by Rubio could further pump-up the stock of the charismatic, 41-year-old Miamian.

New Jersey Gov. Chris Cristie will deliver the convention’s keynote address tonight. That’s a role then-Illinois Sen. Barack Obama used to his advantage at the 2004 Democratic gathering, when his fiery speech seared his image as an up-and-comer in the minds of national Democrats.

Maybe now is Rubio’s shot at history, his supporters said.
“His ability to connect with people is phenomenal,” Day said.

Florida Democrats, who head to Charlotte, N.C., next week for their party’s national convention, shrug at the importance of Sunshine State Republican luminaries getting turns at the microphone.

They’re clearly hoping for the worst.

“These speeches are kind of like what they used to say about the forward pass in football,” said Scott Arceneaux, executive director of the Florida Democratic Party. “Three things can happen, and two of them aren’t good.”

Still, Florida Republicans heading to Tampa said there will be potent symbolism conveyed with each speaker.

In a year when Democrats ridicule Republicans for policies they say amount to a “war on women,” Bondi can be presented as an important GOP officeholder who spearheaded a national legal effort against Obama’s Affordable Care Act all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Bush will be the sole representative of his family with a prominent role at the convention, with his father and brother, the nation’s 41st and 43rd presidents, not planning to attend.

Bush, well-loved by party loyalists and always courted for a White House run, could be making an initial move in that direction in Tampa.

Another legacy Republican, Mack, is seeking a U.S. Senate seat once held by his father. An effective few minutes at the mike could burnish his own reputation before a partisan audience.

Besides Mack, no Florida member of the U.S. House, including firebrand U.S. Rep. Allen West of Palm Beach Gardens, a tea party favorite and one of only two black Republicans in the House, have been given main-stage speaking assignments.

Other high-ranking Florida Republicans also have drawn low-key roles at the home-state convention.

Chief Financial Officer Jeff Atwater, a former North Palm Beach state lawmaker, will make appearances at luncheons and secondary events, also serving as part of a loose-knit group of “Catholics for Romney.”

Florida Agriculture Commissioner Adam Putnam will be at the convention, but has generally unspecified duties as part of the “Ranchers for Romney” campaign.

Lt. Gov. Jennifer Carroll, clouded by allegations from a fired employee that she engaged in lesbian sex with another aide, will speak at an “American Competitiveness” luncheon Monday sponsored by the American Action Network, a conservative policy group.
Kevin Wagner, a Florida Atlantic University political scientist, said that while “meaningful things used to happen at conventions, that has mostly stopped.”

Now, it’s a made-for-television extravaganza with a deceptively simple goal, he said.

“Whoever speaks now, it’s mostly about energizing the party’s base,” Wagner said. “It’s a four-day pep rally. Parties want these voters fired up for the fall.”

---

**FLORIDIANS ON STAGE**

**TUESDAY**

Sharon Day, Republican National Committee co-chair

Tampa Mayor Bob Buckhorn, the only Democratic speaker

Tampa Bay Host Committee Al Austin

**WEDNESDAY**

Attorney General Pam Bondi

**THURSDAY**


Former Gov. Jeb Bush

U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio

For continuous coverage of the Republican National Convention, go to [pbpost.com/go/rnc2012](http://pbpost.com/go/rnc2012).