Underdog Mack gets shot at redefining incumbent Nelson in Senate debate tonight

By John Kennedy

Palm Beach Post Capital Bureau

TALLAHASSEE —

A day after a much-watched presidential debate, Republican Connie Mack IV and Democrat Bill Nelson take the stage tonight at Davie’s Nova Southeastern University for their own high-stakes face-off in Florida’s U.S. Senate contest.

Most television stations statewide, including WPTV-TV Channel 5, plan to carry the hourlong debate live, beginning at 7 p.m.

Viewership won’t hit presidential numbers, but the broadcast of the lone Senate debate will reach more than 7.5 million Florida households. And the exchange between the two contenders may significantly shape the campaign’s closing days.

With sparring likely across such issues as Medicare, balancing the federal budget and the character of each man, Mack will be out to close what polls show have shown to be a relatively safe lead for Nelson, a two-term incumbent.

But as Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney has opened a slight lead in Florida over President Barack Obama this month, Mack’s prospects have improved.

“The race is still leaning Democrat,” said Jennifer Duffy, senior editor of the nonpartisan Cook Political Report in Washington. “But it’s one we’re watching a little more closely now.”

For months, Mack, a four-term congressman from Fort Myers, has acknowledged that his chances are tied to Romney’s.

“If Mitt Romney wins, I win. If I win, Mitt Romney wins,” Mack has said at campaign stops across the state.

But the math may not be that simple.
In an average of polls, Mack was trailing Nelson by 7.3 percent before the first presidential debate, widely seen as won by Romney following a lackluster performance by Obama. Now, Mack trails Nelson by an average 6.7 percent – closer, but not by much.

Compare that to Romney’s surge in Florida. In the same time period, Romney has gained an average 5.3 percent in Florida polls – and now leads Obama by 2.5 percent in the nation’s largest toss-up state.

“Mack is going to need a significant win in Florida by Romney,” said Jessica Taylor, who tracks Senate races for the Rothenberg Political Report. “A 1- or 2-percentage win by Romney in the state, I don’t think will be enough for Mack.

“But he has to show signs that he is keeping it close,” she added. “Otherwise, third-party spenders are going to put their money in other states in the closing days. Wisconsin, Virginia, Connecticut, even North Dakota and Montana, these are races where they may see there’s more of a chance for a Republican win.”

The current Senate split is 51 Democrats to 47 Republicans, with two independents who caucus with Democrats, giving that party a 53-seat majority. Of the 33 Senate races on ballots this year, Democrats are defending 23 seats, compared with 10 for Republicans.

Mack said he expects as much as $30 million to be spent by him and such organizations backing him as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Freedom PAC and American Crossroads. Nelson has drawn some independent spending, too, but had an early fundraising advantage over Mack that has endured.

Close to half the TV spots aired in the race last month were paid for by independent political committees, analysts said.

With both candidates recently completing robust fundraising quarters, Nelson said he has $6.5 million in the bank for the home stretch, more than double Mack’s cash on hand.

Tonight, however, campaign finance will take a back seat to policy distinctions between the two men.

Mack has sought to crest a Republican wave by tying Nelson to Obama, ridiculing them as “lockstep liberals” in TV ads and further blasting his opponent as a “career politician.” Nelson, 70, was first elected to the state House in Florida in 1972 – when Mack, 45, was only 5 years old.

During tonight’s debate, Mack is expected to continue boring in on Nelson for backing Obama on the federal stimulus spending, the Affordable Care Act and extending the Bush-era tax cuts for the middle class, but not for more affluent households.

Mack said the tax vote will hurt small businesses in a still-fragile economy.
Nelson, too, is certain to swing back at Mack. The Democrat had the cash early on in the race to put up advertising ridiculing Mack as a spoiled senator’s son – his namesake father having held the seat from 1989 to 2001, when he was succeeded by Nelson.

Nelson also is likely to emphasize his centrist leanings – giving him some separation from Obama.

While congressional ratings services score him in the high 90s in terms of being a reliable Democratic vote supporting the president’s policies, Nelson also has clashed at times with the administration.

His criticism of federal officials for being slow to distribute payments to Gulf businesses following the BP oil spill also has managed to win Nelson at least modest praise across the Florida Panhandle, a conservative area Mack needs to win big.

Kevin Wagner, a Florida Atlantic University political scientist, said Mack faces a tall task in the race’s last three weeks. But at least he has to start by redefining Nelson for voters tonight.

“Nelson, for better or worse, has managed to keep a relatively noncontroversial image in the Senate – and that’s remarkable,” Wagner said. “But it’s an image that’s very hard to run against if you’re Connie Mack.”