Ron Klein, Allen West to debate Monday at Bethesda

By DAVID ROGERS

DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

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U.S. Rep. Ron Klein and challenger Allen West are scheduled to face-off in a debate Monday at The Episcopal Church of Bethesda-by-the-Sea.

Klein, a Democrat, and West, a Republican, have been slugging it out for months in hard-hitting political ads in a bid to represent District 22 in the House of Representatives. In a moderate-leaning district that kept Republican Clay Shaw in the seat from 1993-2006, Klein and West are attempting to paint the other as an extremist.

Ads supporting Klein, the two-term incumbent, portray West as a far-right reactionary whose wobbly personal finances undercut West's claim to be fiscally conservative.

Ads for West portray Klein as a far-left liberal who has supported an economic stimulus package unpopular with Tea Party supporters and some Republicans, and as a puppet of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

The race is seen as a tight one, according to political analyst Kevin Wagner, an associate professor of political science at Florida Atlantic University. With the Nov. 2 election closing in, the race may be decided by money.

“And it looks like West has a lot of it,” Wagner said. “The Republican Party has invested a good amount of money, and time and effort, into this race. And they see it as a winnable race.”

But Wagner said Klein is liked by many in his district, so the political analyst is hesitant to suggest which candidate will win the office. The race could be considered “a pretty good bellwether” for other races across the country, according to Wagner. “If Klein keeps his seat, it’s a sign the Democrats might not get wiped out like some people think. If he loses, all bets are off.”

WPTV Channel 5 anchor Jim Sackett will moderate the event, which starts at 10 a.m. This, the third debate between Klein and West, will air live on WPTV’s web site, www.wptv.com.

Each candidate will have four minutes for an opening statement. Then Palm Beach Daily News political reporter Michele Dargan and Palm Beach Post political columnist George Bennett will ask the candidates a series of questions. That will be followed by a three-minute closing statement by Klein and West.
There is limited seating in the church’s parish hall. Ned Barnes, executive director of the Palm Beach Civic Association, the debate’s sponsor, encourages residents to arrive early to get a seat. The nonprofit organization does not endorse candidates.

“We present these opportunities for people to see and hear the candidates so they can make informed decisions when they go to the polls,” Barnes said.