Tea party activists in South Florida hope to build on election success

By Anthony Man, Sun Sentinel

6:10 PM EST, November 29, 2010

Tea party activists in South Florida barely took time to celebrate before planning for the next stage of their movement.

Energized by high-profile election victories of the people they most wanted to see win — Rick Scott for governor, Marco Rubio for U.S. Senate, and Allen West for Congress — they want even more.

Ed Bender, a regular at the weekly Fort Lauderdale tea party protest, now holds a new sign for passing motorists: "We're just getting started."

Now in their sights: local government.

"We're taking ownership of our cities and counties," said Karin Hoffman, founder of the South Florida-based tea party group DC Works For Us.

Bender said tea party members would be deployed to city and county halls. "We're going to put people in to watch the [County] Commission meetings and the city meetings. We're going to put people in there to watch what's going on so that we have a bird's-eye view as to what's going on and who's listening."

South Florida tea party activists also said they're not going to assume that Scott, Rubio and West will necessarily do the right thing.

"They're going to be scrutinized even more" than other politicians, said Everett Wilkinson, chairman of the South Florida Tea Party, based in Palm Beach County. "They ran on key issues of the tea party, and so we're going to hold them accountable to what they said they're going to do."

Two priorities, cited by many tea party activists and leaders are limiting the reach of government and fiscal responsibility. Many want to see the federal health care overhaul law repealed.

Danita Kilcullen, co-leader of Tea Party Fort Lauderdale, said a top priority is keeping an eye on "people that we believe we were instrumental in sending to Washington and Tallahassee [and] keeping them straight."

Several tea party activists said they're unhappy about Scott's plans for an inaugural ball funded by interest groups.
"He said it wouldn't be business as usual. That's why we voted for him," said Norm Pratis, a tea party activist from Oakland Park. "The king is naked."

The feeling isn't universal. Wilkinson said he hasn't heard any complaints. "I just love this man. I'm not ready to throw him under the bus the first week out," Kilcullen said.

Despite all the activists' hopes, Kevin Wagner, a political scientist at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, said talk about a lasting movement isn't realistic — given what's happened with previous movements.

"The tea party's important because it represents a large group of people," Wagner said. "The question isn't will the 5 percent of the tea party that's extremely active remain active. I'm sure they will. The question is what about the other 95 percent."

Working against a long-term future for the tea party is the inevitable cyclical improvement in the economy, which Wagner said would reduce intensity. And at least some tea party-supported candidates are "unlikely to deliver what they want and then they become disenchanted."

Organizers acknowledge turnout at some of the weekly protests is down from its pre-election peak. Before the election, the weekly protest from 1 to 3:30 p.m. Sundays at the southeast corner of Flamingo Road and Sunrise Boulevard drew as many as 50 people a week. Since the election, it's been 10 to 30.

Leaders said there's still a lot of energy that's only temporarily diverted by people focusing on their families and the holidays. "Just because we're not at the corner doesn't mean we're not doing anything," said Joe Goldner, a leader of the tea party in Sunrise.

Kilcullen's priority is organizing people to watch specific issues and individuals. Her group, which demonstrates from 1 to 3 p.m. every Saturday at the intersection of Oakland Park Boulevard and Federal Highway in Fort Lauderdale, recently hosted a question-and-answer session for candidates running for chairman of the Broward Republican Party.

Others are starting to think about candidates for 2012, Hoffman said.

Bender received 34 percent of the vote as a poorly funded, no party affiliation candidate against state Rep. Evan Jenne, D-Dania Beach. He's thinking of running for office again.

Also eyeing a candidacy is Goldner, possibly for Congress or U.S. Senate.

Goldner carries a large, yellow "Don't Tread On Me" flag, symbol of the tea party movement, when he participates in weekend protests.

"It will be in my office when I win," he said.

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