West's millions rank him No. 2 in U.S. House

Big-spending race draws nationwide donors

By William E. Gibson, Washington Bureau

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WASHINGTON — Boosted by conservative fans across the country, South Florida U.S. Rep. Allen West has raised more money for his re-election campaign than any other House candidate this year except for Speaker John Boehner.

West, a Republican freshman and tea party favorite from Plantation, raised $5.8 million through Dec. 31, more than $8 for every resident he hopes to represent in a newly drawn district anchored in northern Palm Beach County. Most of that money comes from outside Florida, a sign that his closely watched race has reverberations well beyond his home state.

West is spending money almost as fast as he collects it, leaving $2.7 million of cash on hand. His big haul reflects an extensive network of conservative donors, the effectiveness of direct-mail fundraising and the far-reaching impact of his national exposure through TV news appearances.

About 3,000 miles from South Florida, Don Boos, 73, a landscape architect in Gardnerville, Nev., was so impressed with West's TV interviews that he sent $300 to him late last year.

"He's forthright and speaks like he knows what's got to happen. No mush, no gibberish, no rhetoric," said Boos, whose mailbox is often stacked with campaign solicitations from West and others. The long-distance donor was especially inspired by West's feud with fellow U.S. Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz, D-Weston, which gained national attention last year after an angry exchange over Medicare cutbacks. "He has to gain money to beat her out," Boos said.

Democratic campaign leaders in Washington have targeted West's seat as a top priority, which means the national party will devote money and advertising to try to defeat him.

"Beating Allen West — and defeating the tea party — would be a good feeling," West's Democratic opponent, Patrick Murphy of Fort Lauderdale, said last week. "Going against a national star who is very beatable is important, and I think this race is viewed as a microcosm of the bigger picture, because this election will probably be determined by independents."

Murphy and West, both from Broward County, have moved their campaign clash into the newly drawn 18th congressional district in Martin, St. Lucie and northern Palm Beach counties, where independent voters comprise a quarter of the electorate, and Democrats and Republicans are about equally divided. President Barack Obama barely won this area in the 2008 presidential
campaign, and Republican Florida Gov. Rick Scott barely won it during the governor's race in 2010, indicating that the 18th could go to either party.

Murphy, vice president of Coastal Environmental Services, which specializes in cleaning up oil spills, grew up in a family construction business and has tapped contractors in Florida and elsewhere to help round up an impressive $1.42 million in contributions. He has spent $521,194, leaving $897,141 of available cash, according to compilations of federal campaign reports by the Center for Responsive Politics, an independent watchdog group in Washington.

The $1.42 million makes Murphy the fourth-largest fundraiser among U.S. House candidates in Florida, behind West, Wasserman Schultz ($1.69 million) and Democrat Lois Frankel of West Palm Beach ($1.44 million), who is running for West's current House seat in District 22 along the Broward/Palm Beach County coastline.

While West taps conservative voters with direct-mail solicitations, Murphy contacts friends and business acquaintances while seeking money through the Internet.

The challenger acknowledges he will have to raise his campaign profile to keep pace. "It's going to have to take on a national presence," Murphy said.

About 54 percent of West's money and only 22 percent of Murphy's came from out of state, according to the center's compilation. That does not take into account hundreds of non-itemized contributions of less than $200; these account for $3.2 million of West's total.

West's $5.8 million through 2011 is far more than the money collected by most of the heavyweights in Congress, according to the center's compilations. More than House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, R-Va., who received $3.9 million. More than Rep. Dave Camp, R-Mich., chairman of the powerful Ways and Means Committee, $2.46 million. More than Budget Chairman Paul Ryan, R-Wis., $2.43 million.

But unlike many members of Congress, West has raised relatively little — about 5 percent of the total — from political action committees.

West attributes his fundraising prowess to a "tide of dissatisfaction with business as usual in Washington." His average donation is about $53, according to his campaign, and 94 percent of contributions come from individual donors.

"This is going to be one of the few competitive districts, and a lot of outside money does tend to come to the ones that the parties think they can steal or retain," said Kevin Wagner, a political scientist at Florida Atlantic University. "If Murphy shows he can compete, he'll see a fair amount of Democratic money float down. West is a popular figure, especially among tea party groups, so you will see a fair amount of outside money coming to him regardless, making this an expensive race."
District 18, unlike West's current District 22, is outside the Miami TV market, so he and Murphy can focus on the less expensive West Palm Beach market. And this will be a campaign fought on the airwaves.

"This is not New Hampshire," Wagner said. "Nobody does a lot of door-to-door campaigning here. You have to use some expensive techniques to reach Florida voters, and that involves mass media and television. Even direct mail can be very expensive if you reach out to large groups of people."

That's why both candidates are raising so much money, and why they're spending so much to raise more.

"You can have a very appealing message," Wagner said. "But if nobody hears it, you are not likely to win."