With primary looming, Republican candidates flock to Florida

Santorum, Romney campaign in Florida; Gingrich arrives Monday

By Anthony Man, Sun Sentinel

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POMPANO BEACH

Like spring breakers or Canadian snowbirds, Republican presidential contenders started flocking to Florida on Sunday – except their nine days will be anything but restful.

Newt Gingrich, Mitt Romney and Rick Santorum are all looking to keep alive their hopes of winning their party's presidential nomination. Victory in the Jan. 31 primary is the prize, but each hopes to avoid the kind of humiliation at the polls that would force him from the race.

During appearances in Broward County on Sunday, Santorum portrayed himself as the only genuine conservative in the running attacked Gingrich and Romney as people who couldn't be trusted to uphold conservative principles.

Appearing in Volusia County, Romney attacked Gingrich, who decisively won Saturday's South Carolina primary, as someone who became a lobbyist and whose tenure as speaker of the House ended in disgrace.

Gingrich arrives in Tampa on Monday and plans rallies and fundraising events across the state through the primary. On Sunday he went after Romney on NBC's Meet the Press.

"One of the thing that Florida voters get to decide is do you want the establishment's candidate, Governor Romney, or do you want somebody who stands for a conservative, populist approach that would profoundly change Washington," he said.

With the Florida campaign now officially in high gear, expect more of the same.

"It's going to be a pretty serious and a fairly negative campaign," said Kevin Wagner, a political scientist at Florida Atlantic University. Santorum himself acknowledged what's coming. "There's going to be a lot of missiles fly here in the next 10 days and our hope is to keep our head down a little bit."

With more Republicans than Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina combined, Florida is unlike any of the three states that have voted so far.
It's far more diverse, said Richard DeNapoli, chairman of the Broward Republican Party. Santorum, for example, was forced to defend his position against the Dream Act to a reporter from Spanish-language television. The proposed law would permit legal status for undocumented immigrants serving in the military or getting a college degree.

The biggest challenge for candidates is Florida's sheer size. It has 10 media markets, including the expensive Miami-Fort Lauderdale area, which makes it costly to compete, DeNapoli said. And in a state that's so big, Wagner said advertising is the only way for candidates to get known, especially since they have little more than a week.

The two Florida debates, Monday and Thursday nights, could prove pivotal. In South Carolina, Gingrich's poll numbers soared after what were seen as good debate nights while Romney tanked after his widely panned performances.

Still, Romney appears to have an edge in Florida, Wagner said, because he has the money for TV ads, Florida Republicans aren't as conservative South Carolinians, and he's organized. With 180,000 Florida absentee ballots cast by the middle of last week, he said Romney likely has an advantage.

Romney is the candidate the Democrats worry about most. In a Sunday conference call with reporters to "welcome" the candidates to Florida, U.S. Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz, D-Weston, chairwoman of the Democratic National Committee, devoted most of her scorn to Romney though she added Gingrich was "no better."

Gingrich has enough devoted followers to win Florida, said Karin Hoffman, co-chairwoman of his campaign in Broward. "When you get people's hearts, and they're willing to put in shoe leather, that counts more than money."

And, Wagner said, Gingrich has momentum from South Carolina. Like Romney, he'll also benefit from a so-called Super PAC spending money on his behalf.

Florida could prove difficult for Santorum, who has less money and less organization. He was vague Sunday, saying he was "not sure" how much time he'll devote to Florida, leaving open the possibility that he'll leave for part of the week to campaign in other states.

Still the 350 people who turned out to see Santorum at the Worldwide Christian Center in Pompano Beach and 300 or so at Wings Plus in Coral Springs, were thrilled with the candidate.

"It was outstanding. It reminded me of Ronald Reagan. He is the new Reagan who can bring this country together and keep the world safe," said Loretta Murray of Dania Beach. "I believe he is the only candidate who is truly electable."

Santorum said the best way to strengthen the economy is by strengthening the family. And, he said, that means married couples – a man and a woman, not gays and lesbians – should be raising children.
He also took a strong position on Iran, an issue that's a major concern for many South Florida Jewish voters. As president, he'd tell Iran to stop developing a nuclear weapon "or we will dismantle it for you," suggesting military action. "That is not an act that will start a war. That is an act that will prevent a war."

The fourth candidate, Ron Paul, is bypassing Florida to concentrate on states with caucuses, where bands of dedicated followers can have an outsized impact. On Sunday, his campaign was evident only through a few supporters who held up signs for their candidate at one of Santorum's events.

*Staff writer Scott Powers contributed to this report.*