Tea Party Leaders Endorse Gingrich: High Risk, Low Reward

By: Kenric Ward | Posted: January 28, 2012 3:55 AM

"The Florida Tea Party Coalition With Newt" endorsed the former House speaker on Thursday, saying they would "help defeat Massachusetts Moderate Mitt Romney and then President Barack Obama."

“It is clear to me and many others in the tea party movement that Newt is the Reagan conservative that America needs,” said Peter Lee, founder and director of the East Side Tea Party of Orlando.

Lee was joined by statewide tea leader Patricia Sullivan, who said, “I stand with Newt because I know he will stand up to the establishment and insist on fiscal reforms.”

In all, more than 30 Florida-based tea activists signed on to the coalition. The geographically diverse representatives ranged from the Panhandle to Broward County.

Separately, the TEA Party of Florida, the only political tea party registered with the state Division of Elections, endorsed Gingrich.

Chairman John Long said Gingrich "articulated direct and serious steps designed to reduce spending, cut our deficits, pay down our national debt, and return liberty to our citizens in doing so.”

But the endorsements may be too little and too late for the former House speaker, whose poll numbers in Florida have slumped amid two lackluster debate performances on Monday and Thursday.

Meanwhile, Gingrich continues to mystify and anger conservatives as he panders on illegal immigration and rationalizes his $1.6 million contract with Freddie Mac while adopting populist poses that resemble left-wing class warfare.

Still, some tea party leaders, fearing the growing inevitability of Romney as the GOP nominee, felt they had to take a stand before Tuesday’s Florida primary. Romney is
perceived as the "establishment candidate" and widely distrusted by tea party groups, who have received little or no attention from the former Massachusetts governor.

Billie Tucker, leader of the First Coast Tea Party in Jacksonville, is not endorsing any candidates, but acknowledges Gingrich has strong appeal in the movement.

Gingrich won 43 percent of the 322 votes cast in a First Coast straw poll on Jan. 17. Ron Paul received 26 percent, Romney garnered 19 percent and Rick Santorum netted 10 percent.

Gingrich's ties to the tea party movement are deep and long-lasting.

In March 2009, when tea parties were just beginning to be organized, the Georgian pledged to use his prodigious mailing list at American Solutions to publicize the inaugural Tax Day event.

He posted a link on every website he owned, sent emails to everyone in his database and produced a video while publicly announcing his support of the tea party movement - long before radio talkers like Glenn Beck jumped on the bandwagon.

Sullivan, who chairs a statewide tea group called the Tea Party Network, is repaying the favor by mobilizing her Lake County-based "Patriot Army" on Gingrich's behalf.

"Once I decided to support Newt, I got to work and took a group of Patriot Army members to South Carolina where we walked precincts for three days, then waved signs at the polls," Sullivan said.

Then she returned to Florida, where she set up a Gingrich rally at Mount Dora.

"Time for talk is over, we need to be about action. That is why I actively support the candidate I believe will stand up to the establishment and rein in spending," she said.

Explaining the mechanics of the coalition endorsement, Sullivan said, "The leaders and members will share their views with their tea party and actively work to get out the vote for Newt."

"I don't believe another candidate has a coalition of tea party leaders willing to get out and work for their candidate, but I could be wrong."

Sullivan, who previously supported Herman Cain, said the Tea Party Network is not involved in the endorsement.

Some say the tea endorsement is a risky move, coming after other tea party favorites -- Cain, Michele Bachmann and Rick Perry -- each exited the race amid controversy or anemic polls.
"If Gingrich loses, the tea party is over," predicted one veteran tea party activist from South Florida. "If he loses, what does that show you about the clout of the tea party?"

The activist, who spoke on condition of anonymity, cast his early ballot for Ron Paul this week. "He stands for what we stood for in 2009."

A former executive with the Florida TEA (Taxed Enough Already) Party doubts that the coalition backing will help Gingrich much.

"Far more influential was the endorsement of the reconstituted TEA Party of Florida. That tea party has a much-desired email list of over 100,000 opt-in participants. And, unlike the self-pronounced 'tea party coalition,' it has a track record of actually receiving votes for candidates," said Doug Guetzloe, an Orlando-based political consultant who has returned to the Republican Party.

"The 'coalition tea party' backing is one of the last acts of an inflated collection of egos," Guetzloe said. "Their endorsement will make no difference."

Some tea activists steered clear of endorsing out of concern that they might run afoul of election laws or tax codes. Others simply disagree with Gingrich politically.

Gingrich's infamous couch talk with Nancy Pelosi about "global warming" and his dismissal of Rep. Paul Ryan's entitlement reforms as "right-wing social engineering" fly in the face of conservative orthodoxy.

Illustrating the fractious character of the tea movement, Steve Vernon, vice president of Tea Party Manatee, signed on to the Gingrich coalition, even though Rick Santorum won a straw poll conducted by his group before the South Carolina primary.

Vernon said he and others in his Gulf Coast tea party consider Santorum a "bigger government guy" who repeatedly voted for earmarks as a two-term Pennsylvania senator.

"Some say he can't win," Vernon added.

"We could have a totally different outcome this week. It's still up in the air," Vernon said, emphasizing that the Gingrich tea coalition is made up of individuals, and not binding on groups.

Several large tea organizations remain unaligned. In addition to Tucker's First Coast Tea Party, sizable tea and patriot organizations in Naples, Englewood and Venice are absent from the coalition. The combined membership of these groups is estimated at 15,000.

Still, Tucker does not dispute or begrudge the coalition's action.
"They have chosen to stand up for their guy and that is their decision," she said.

Danita Kilcullen is less sanguine about the process. The chairwoman of Tea Party Fort Lauderdale said she is "appalled" at the endorsements for Gingrich.

"The tea party, of all people, should be aware of his globalist, progressive agenda. He would be my absolute last pick."

Beyond that, Kilcullen said endorsements can create unnecessary "splits and hard feelings" within tea parties.

"Our group overwhelmingly supports Santorum, but it's not right to endorse," she said.

Tea Party Express, a national organization, is holding off on a presidential endorsement, but that could change before Tuesday.

"The movement is coalescing around Gingrich," Amy Kremer, president of Tea Party Express, told Sunshine State News. She said former Rep. J.C. Watts would be standing in for Gingrich at the group's rally in Jacksonville on Saturday.

Kevin Wagner, a political science professor at Florida Atlantic University, said Gingrich is a good fit on at least one level.

"Mitt Romney has never been popular with tea party groups, so it is fairly predictable that they would move toward the most viable non-Romney," Wagner noted.

"With that said, Newt Gingrich has a confrontational style that taps into the anger that many tea party members have. He is a natural candidate on an emotional level, if not a policy one, for the tea party supporters."