Republican National Convention will have huge impact on Florida

By Melissa E. Holsman

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When Florida this week hosts the 40th Republican National Convention in Tampa, it will cement Gov. Mitt Romney as the party's presidential candidate while playing host to 50,000 attendees who will generate an estimated $175 million in revenue — a situation dubbed a win-win by GOP leaders.

The threat of Tropical Storm Isaac bearing down on Florida caused GOP officials Saturday night to scrap the first day. The announcement said while the convention officially would be gaveled into session Monday as scheduled, the day's events would be canceled until Tuesday.

Officials said they hope to come up with a revised schedule Sunday.

In addition to the revenue expected to come into the state, the convention at the downtown Tampa Bay Times Forum also is expected to draw 15,000 members of the media, along with 4,411 delegates and alternate delegates from all 50 states, the District of Columbia and five territories.

Stuart Republican Rep. Gayle Harrell, who is attending the convention, said hosting the four-day event is a "major coup" for Florida to highlight the state as a top convention destination, and a chance to welcome Republicans from all over the nation.

"Hopefully, they will come and enjoy Florida so much they'll come back and bring their dollars with them and spend a lot of money in Florida, both while they are here now and when they come back again," Harrell said. "I think it's a marvelous opportunity for us."

Florida hasn't played host to a major political convention since 1972, when both parties had their conventions in Miami Beach, nominating President Richard Nixon for a second term and U.S. Sen. George McGovern as the Democratic nominee.

Gov. Rick Scott in a prepared statement said with the state's drop in unemployment and spike in jobs created by the private sector, holding the convention here will show the nation Florida is on the right track.
"Having the RNC in the Sunshine State offers us the chance to showcase all the things that make our Florida such a great place: Our beautiful beaches, waterways and state parks, our excellent business climate, and most of all, our wonderful people," Scott noted. "But the convention will bring even greater long-term economic benefits. Our policies are moving Florida in the right direction and will be on full display for all of the business leaders who attend, or watch from home."

With about 75,000 hotel room nights booked in the Tampa Bay area, including St. Petersburg, Clearwater and surrounding sprawl, U.S. Rep Bill Posey, R-Rockledge, called the high-profile GOP gathering a "tremendous economic boon."

"It highlights so many of the great qualities about Florida," said Posey, who represents parts of Indian River County. "It should be exciting."

Posey is using his appearance at the convention to tout the work being done by NASA at Kennedy Space Center.

"There will be a lot of members of Congress here, and I've sent a letter to each one of my colleagues and asked ... if they'd like to do a tour of Kennedy Space Center, since the accomplishments and benefits of space are one of America's greatest secrets, it seems," he said. "Some of our colleagues are going to do that, and my staff is working with NASA to make sure they have an opportunity to see what's going on at the space center."

Florida Atlantic University political science professor Kevin Wagner said revenues aside, the convention offers residents keen political insight into Florida as a must-win state that holds 29 electoral votes.

"Politically (the convention) has a couple of important facts: It focuses sometimes on issues that are relevant to Florida because it's in Florida, so that's always important," Wagner said. "And it's good for Floridians because we tend to pay more attention to things that are happening in our state rather than outside our state. So it allows Floridians to become more involved and probably pay attention to the race earlier than they might otherwise do."

The Tampa convention site is situated at the west end of the Interstate 4 corridor, home to the largest concentration of swing voters in the largest swing state.

It's no coincidence, then, that the Republicans have placed their convention here; Romney desperately needs to win Florida if he is going to defeat President Barack Obama. The corridor, 132 miles of bustling highway from Tampa to Daytona Beach, cuts through Orlando and seven diverse Central Florida counties still hurting from a recession that has been slow to loosen its grip there.

About a quarter of the state's registered voters are in the Tampa TV market and local media coverage will be wall-to-wall for at least a week. Add the Orlando TV market, and the area encompasses 44 percent of all Florida voters.
The pomp and grand ritual of a political convention in their own backyards could go a long way toward swaying undecided voters. Especially with an all-star slate of speakers including former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie as keynote speaker, Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker and U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio, of Miami who will introduced Romney Thursday night.

Republican Party of Florida chairman Lenny Curry said the convention is expected to give a bump to Romney and to U.S. Rep Connie Mack's senate race going into November’s general election.

"Politically this is really good for the battleground state and the electoral votes that we have here," Curry said. "The other side is (Gov.) Rick Scott campaigned on, and has lived up to, his campaign promises on job creation and making Florida the place to be, to live, to work, to play.

"And when you think of the value of earned media, it's going to be all eyes on Florida ... when you look at the media presence, it's second only to the (London) Olympics. I mean, it's just a huge deal for Florida."

According to Florida Chamber of Commerce spokeswoman Edie Ousley, almost 40 million people are expected to be watching the convention on television during prime time hours.

Although, with forecasters monitoring Tropical Storm Isaac, convention organizers are keeping a watchful, yet hopeful eye on the tropics.

Curry meanwhile, predicted a great week ahead.

"It will be smooth sailing, everyone will have a good time," he said, "and delegates and Floridians will walk away from this ready for November."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.