Romney rally at noon today in West Palm; Gingrich seen as Romney's biggest threat in state primary | Video

By Melissa E. Holsman

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Mitt Romney is the declared frontrunner and loaded with cash going into South Carolina and Florida presidential primaries. But local political experts aren't counting out former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, who is expected to garner enough money and support to keep the results an open question.

On Thursday night, Romney is expected to scoop up more money at a Palm Beach fundraiser.

But before that, Romney supporters are staging a noontime rally Thursday at the West Palm Beach Convention Center on Okeechobee Boulevard, where Romney is expected to appear from noon to 1:30 p.m., according to campaign officials.

Former U.S. Rep. Mark Foley, who represented portions of the Treasure Coast from 1995 to 2006, predicted by the time Floridians cast their ballots Jan. 31, Gingrich will be the only GOP candidate left with the influence and resources to challenge Romney.

"He's been here a lot, he probably has the highest profile, so Gingrich remains the most potent threat against Romney," Foley said Wednesday. "And Gingrich could pull some strange victory out of South Carolina and then galvanize Floridians; that remains unlikely but it's not unfathomable."

Kevin Lanning, professor of psychology and political expert at Florida Atlantic University's Wilkes Honors College in Jupiter, predicted that by the time the Florida primary takes place, the momentum to elect Romney will be nearly unstoppable.

He said while Republicans look for a candidate who best represents social values such as faith, anti-abortion, the economy and taxes, Florida also is full of swing voters "who are concerned about electability."
"And in this climate, a climate of negativism, it may be who is best as antagonist — on both sides — is going to be really an important determinant," Lanning said. "So I do think Romney will carry Florida, and carry Florida comfortably, and many people will vote for Romney because of that."

State Sen. Joe Negron, R-Stuart, who declined to endorse a candidate, said whoever wants to be the GOP nominee must win Florida.

"I think, if you talk to some of Gov. Romney's people, their belief is that if they would've won Florida (in 2008), then he would have won the nomination," Negron said. "After he lost Florida, he got out of the race shortly afterward. I think that's going to happen again this time; that for a candidate to win Florida, they're going to have to emerge between now and Jan. 31 as an alternative to Gov. Romney.

"I think there's an opportunity for that to happen," he added.

U.S. Rep. Bill Posey, R-Rockledge, who is not endorsing anyone, said he's convinced Florida Republicans will cast a ballot for who they believe is the "best person," and not only measure the candidate against the opposition.

"I think whichever one wins the primary," Posey predicted, "the others will coalesce around."

He suggested that despite Romney's clear frontrunner status, the Florida primary could be up for grabs.

"It's been kind of like musical chairs so far, they've been up and down, up and down and Romney has generally had the lead," Posey said. "But these things are never over until the proverbial fat lady sings."

Gingrich, he said, could still threaten Romney's lead coming into Florida.

"Romney appears to be pretty much on a roll," Posey added, "and a lot of incumbents have endorsed him."

Foley, who also has not endorsed a candidate, said Romney's position as frontrunner will help campaign cash flood into Florida.

"The money has already been rolling in and now he's proven he's made it through two stops: Iowa and New Hampshire and looking decent in South Carolina and probably strong in Florida," Foley said. "So his ATM will be on overdrive and they'll be loading up the Brinks trucks in the next two weeks to get him prepped for Florida."

Lanning contended that there's more behind Romney's success than how electable he appears to voters and his ability to beat President Barack Obama.
"I don't think electability is the prime reason that Romney has been successful. I think it's more that he's had a very savvy campaign, he's been very well positioned ... and he has a lot of money," he said. "He has had the good luck to have a number of candidates on the right, each waiting for everyone else to drop out."

State Rep. Gayle Harrell, who is the state co-chair for the Women With Newt campaign group, said Romney was expected to win in New Hampshire, but she credited much of that victory to the state's open primary system that permits all registered voters in the state to cast a ballot.

"But you can see that 60 percent of the electorate are voting for someone else; they're looking for someone who can represent their core conservative values and they're looking for someone who can beat Obama," she said.

Gingrich will attract those voters in South Carolina and Florida, Harrell said.

"I feel very strongly that Newt can do very well in South Carolina," she said, "and it's going to be his jumping-off point to come in and do a real strong showing in Florida."

Harrell predicted Gingrich will scoop up plenty of political cash as he swings into Florida.

"Newt is really stepping up the fundraising," she said. "We have a big event coming up Thursday in Miami and a big event coming up Friday in Orlando."

Gingrich also plans a public “grass-roots” event in Miami early Friday morning. The midday appearance in Orlando Friday will be for the opening of his Florida headquarters.

Staff writer Jon Mattise contributed to this report.