St. Lucie County played key role in presidential, District 18 races

By Alexi Howk

Thursday, November 8, 2012

ST. LUCIE COUNTY — If there’s any indication of this county's ability to influence an election, it was made clear Tuesday in both the presidential race and the District 18 congressional race.

Without St. Lucie County's support, Democratic newcomer Patrick Murphy, a Jupiter accountant and construction company owner, would not have narrowly and unofficially defeated tea party House freshman Allen West.

And in a state where political pundits were predicting a Florida presidential win for former Massachusetts Republican Gov. Mitt Romney, St. Lucie County played a key role in tightening the race.

"I think St. Lucie County has clearly earned the right to be a battleground county and certainly has proved its muscle in the presidential race," said former Republican U.S. Rep. Mark Foley.

St. Lucie County can join the ranks of Miami-Dade, Broward, Orange and Hillsborough counties as being a battleground county in deciding congressional and presidential elections, Foley said.

"It is no longer an obscure county looking for love in the presidential election," he said, adding that the county, with a biotech industry centered here, is on an uptick in terms of business and politics.

The District 18 race has been one of the most contentious and expensive races in the nation. West raised about $17 million and Murphy raised more than $3.7 million.

Nevertheless, it wasn't money that decided this race. It was Democrats turning out in numbers voting against the outspoken and controversial West, said Celeste Bush, chair of the Democratic Executive Committee of St. Lucie County.

"Bringing a polarizing candidate into our area who doesn't reflect our ideals for the future in Allen West just incensed people to work harder," Bush said. "I do believe that we have built a stronger Democratic base here in St. Lucie County. St. Lucie County is key because it's got a lot of precincts
in it. It's special in regard that we have base Democratic precincts, strong precincts and swing precincts."

District 18 comprises Martin, St. Lucie and northern Palm Beach counties. District 18 was evenly split and redrawn in 2010.

Where St. Lucie is heavily Democratic, Martin is dominated by Republicans, and Palm Beach County is split, with more wealthy Republicans concentrated in northern Palm Beach.

Overall, Murphy led West by only 2,456 votes. In St. Lucie County, Murphy received 13,271 more votes than West. And in the presidential race, 66,246 St. Lucie County residents voted for President Barack Obama, whereas 56,125 people voted for Romney.

Former Democratic U.S. Rep Tim Mahoney said historically, St. Lucie County and its performance in all elections has predictably been a strongly Democratic bastion whereas Martin County has been Republican. He said Martin County is slow-growth, so the population is not growing, whereas St. Lucie County is open for business and the communities it is building tend to be more middle class.

"So, what that means is the demographics of the district are going to become more Democratic over time," Mahoney said, adding that's why Rep. Tom Rooney, R-Tequesta, left (District 18 after it was redrawn. "Certainly the disparity, and St. Lucie County growing and Martin County staying static, and Palm Beach County being 50/50 is making it more difficult for a Republican to hold office."

Kevin Wagner, associate political science professor at Florida Atlantic University, said West faced a more difficult electorate than most Republicans.

"Most of them don't have a St. Lucie County," Wagner said. "Palm Beach County is a Democratic district. But the northern part of Palm Beach County has a Republican base. It's a complicated county. Martin County is Republican. So, looks like the Democrats have the advantage. Without St. Lucie County, Murphy doesn't win this race, so clearly it's an important part of his coalition."