New Super PACs expected to fuel millions into hot District 18 race using TV, mailers

By Jonathan Mattise

Originally published 07:57 p.m., July 26, 2012
Updated 10:03 p.m., July 26, 2012

Through TV or literature in their mailboxes, voters are getting to know U.S. Rep. Allen West as a teacher, an alleged "#1 enemy" for Medicare, an inner-city success story, a playground bully, a war hero, and even the tea party's Mad Hatter of Alice in Wonderland fame.

Two of the country's best-funded congressional campaigners — West and Democrat Patrick Murphy — are already hitting District 18 voters at home with clashing mailers and commercials. With the Aug. 14 primary two weeks away, the onslaught of pricey campaign communications is just getting started in the St. Lucie-Martin-Palm Beach district.

Several new Super PACs, committees not run by candidates that raise unlimited money generally used for slam ads, also could fuel millions more into the $12-million-plus contest.

The bottom line for voters — expect more mailbox clutter and TiVo commercial skip-overs through November.

"We're going to get inundated with not just mailers, but television advertisements and targeted ads in a volume we're not used to," said Florida Atlantic University political science professor Kevin Wagner.

U.S. Rep. West, a Plantation Republican renting in Palm Beach Gardens, has racked up a $4.34 million bill this cycle just on direct mailers he's sending nationwide. He has spent $490,000 on TV ads through June 30, and has $2.5 million more air time reserved through election season. With about $10 million raised across the country, however, West is one of few candidates who can afford spending $6.3 million total.

Former Democratic Treasure Coast U.S. Rep. Tim Mahoney said West's controversial messages require big spending to reach his national audience.
"The bad news for Allen West is for every dollar he raises, he spends 80 cents because that's what it costs," Mahoney said. "The other thing he does is motivate centrist and left-wing groups to donate against him."

West's three TV ads paint him as a life-saving Army officer, a teacher — he spent nine months as a Broward County high school instructor — and an anti-Washington candidate who is "just getting started." His mailers largely maintain the same messages, except for one four-pager calling his GOP primary competition Martin County Sheriff Robert Crowder his "liberal opponent."

Murphy, a Fort Lauderdale accountant renting in Jupiter, has spent $990,000 of the $2.3 million he's brought in. His campaign reported spending about $50,000 for three or four direct mailers, not including design costs lumped into $364,000 in consulting fees. Murphy has more than $460,000 in TV space reserved, and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee has $656,000 and its Super PAC has $390,000 in West Palm Beach market TV time likely to be used for Murphy.

Murphy's two TV spots depict West as a playground bully, and call Murphy a "builder, not a talker." In one mailer, the Murphy campaign dressed up West like the Mad Hatter, gave him a teapot and asked voters to get an absentee ballot and "Stop Allen West's Tea Party." Another mailer has West holding a burning Medicare card, and it's labeled "Medicare's #1 Enemy."

Former U.S. Rep. Mark Foley, a Republican who represented the Treasure Coast, said Murphy took the wrong approach as someone new to the area.

"When you're trying to introduce yourself to voters, to make attack ads or whimsical, comical ads is less effective," Foley said.

Crowder's campaign, confined to a $64,000 budget, sent a two-sided mailer comparing himself to West. Stacy Ranieri, a campaign consultant, said the modest-sized piece cost $12,000 to send.

But Mahoney said he wouldn't be surprised to see Crowder pull off an upset. Foley all but ruled out a Crowder win.

Palm City Democrat Jim Horn also got into the mailer mix with scathing criticisms of Murphy's support through his family's construction company.

In addition, big spending shows District 18 candidates are making the rounds nationally. West spent $45,500 to travel to fundraisers in New York, California, Atlanta, Tennessee, Texas, Arizona and more. The trips don't stop there. He's headed to Providence, R.I. and Syracuse, N.Y. next week to raise money for himself and other GOP players. At the Syracuse event, $1,000 gets you a ticket and a photo with West.

Murphy likewise has been to Washington, Arizona, Tennessee, Chicago, and elsewhere, tallying more than $11,000 in travel expenses.
The race also will soon be subject to groups that can accept unlimited contributions, upping the District 18 stakes even further.

The Super PAC "Dump West" formed earlier this month. Democratic strategist Andrew Perez said he formed the group in hopes of raising $5 million to oust West. Super PACs can't coordinate with candidates themselves.

Murphy's dad just donated $250,000 to the Super PAC "American Sunrise," which lists only Murphy on its website as a "supported candidate." Murphy's father runs Coastal Construction Group and already is a large contributor to his son's campaign.

"We only know what we've heard of that through newspapers," said Anthony Kusich, Murphy campaign manager.

Another group has its sights set locally. "Treasure Coast Jobs Coalition" Super PAC was formed earlier this month by New York/New Jersey attorney James Tyrrell III, who has written big checks to GOP presidential nominee Mitt Romney and other Republicans.

Wagner said Super PAC contributions could easily creep into the millions for the race.

"I actually believe Super PACs are going to make a much bigger difference in races like this, between West and Murphy, than in national elections where they're getting the whole coverage," Wagner said.

DISTRICT 18 BIG SPENDING

U.S. Rep. Allen West, R-Plantation (rents house in Palm Beach Gardens)Totals

Raised: $9.9 million

Spent: $6.3 million

Noteworthy expenditures through June 30

$4.34 million: Direct mail expenses (mailing, stamps, design, renting mailing lists, express delivery)

$420,025: TV ads, starting June 11

$261,592: fundraising/event planning contractors

$219,610: Internet ads

$45,458: travel expenses to fundraisers, meetings nationwide
$50,821: employee salaries

$23,000: polling

Patrick Murphy, D-Fort Lauderdale (rents townhouse in Jupiter)

Totals

Raised: $2.3 million

Spent: $990,000

Noteworthy expenditures through June 30

$364,168: media/fundraising/campaigning contractors (includes design of mailers)

$112,697: employee salaries

$48,078: direct mail/printing/postage costs

$35,500: polling

$35,487: payroll taxes

$10,893: travel expenses to fundraisers, meetings nationwide

Robert Crowder, R-Stuart

Totals

Raised: $63,694

Spent: $41,626

Noteworthy expenditures through June 30

$13,000: polling

$12,646: campaigning contractors

$10,440: candidate qualifying fee

$1,590: radio ads

Others
Jim Horn, D-Palm City, Jerry Buechler, D-Port St. Lucie, and Marilyn Davis Holloman, Port St. Lucie Democratic write-in have not reported any spending to the FEC.

Additional planned TV ad buys in West Palm Beach market

West: $2.47 million

House Majority PAC (pro-Republican): $252,000

Murphy: $149,405 (for general election); $315,000 (for primary election)

Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) Super PAC: $390,305; DCCC: $656,000 (general election)

Service Employees International Union: $126,000

SUPER PACS FORMING

"Dump West": anti-West committee formed July 17 by Democratic strategist Andrew Perez of Fort Lauderdale

"American Sunrise": Patrick's Murphy's father donated $250,000 to committee formed in January; Murphy listed as only candidate supported on committee website

"Treasure Coast Jobs Coalition": committee formed July 12 by traditionally Republican donor James Tyrrell III, a New York/New Jersey lawyer with Patton Boggs LLP

Sources: Federal Election Commission, company and Super PAC websites, Murphy campaign manager Anthony Kusich