Rooney's work to help defeat costly project called 'victory' for his career

By Jim Turner

The Washington-based political website Politico called Wednesday's House vote to kill a costly alternative engine for the Pentagon's next-generation fighter jet "a career-defining victory" for Rep. Tom Rooney.

And that was not the only national media outlet giving Rooney credit for overcoming the House GOP leadership to shoot down the back-up engine that has also been opposed by President Barack Obama, former President George W. Bush, Defense Secretary Robert Gates and the Pentagon.

The sophomore representative, whose district includes large parts of Martin and St. Lucie counties, agreed that his efforts to defeat the engine — slated to cost $3 billion over the next few years and $450 million this year alone — are his "biggest victory so far in Congress."

Rooney, in an e-mail, said the vote to end the alternative program sent "a message to the American people that Congress heard their call to eliminate wasteful spending and put an end to business as usual."

The 233-198 vote came against the efforts of House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, and House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, R-Va., who have backed the alternate engine for the F-35 fighter jets by General Electric Co.

G.E., which provides about 1,000 jobs near Boehner's home.

Meanwhile, Connecticut-based Pratt & Whitney, the primary engine maker, has a plant in northern Palm Beach County.

Despite going up against party leadership, little fallout is expected for Rooney, a U.S. military veteran who earlier this year was given a leadership post in Congress, being named a GOP deputy whip.
Florida Atlantic University Assistant Professor of Political Science Martin Sweet said he wouldn't be surprised if Rooney received "at least the tacit approval" of the Republican leadership to go against House leadership.

"First, there is very much a strong anti-pork sentiment pervading most of Washington now, so Rooney's position here is not really at odds with Republican leadership," Sweet said. "Second, Tom, as a vet himself, is effectively immune from being portrayed as anti-military."

Rooney, R-Tequesta, and Rep. John Larson, D-Conn., introduced the amendment needed to end the alternate engine program.

"Our constituents get it — this program is a waste of money," Rooney's spokesman Mike Mahaffey said.

The Senate hasn't voted on the alternative engine program's funding.