Freshman has GOP abuzz with talk of 2012

South Floridian a tea party darling

By Sean Lengell

The Washington Times

8:00 p.m., Wednesday, March 23, 2011

Rep. Allen B. West has served his South Florida district for less than three months, but already his supporters are demanding more.

Run for Senate in 2012, some say. Others suggest the outspoken conservative Republican would make a perfect vice presidential candidate next year.

Even a "West for president" movement has spread among conservative tea party supporters, who have used blogs, YouTube videos and a Facebook page to promote the man they want in the White House come January 2013.

The national buzz surrounding Mr. West has waned little since November, when the retired Army lieutenant colonel defeated Democratic incumbent Ron Klein and became a nationwide tea party sensation.

"As long as the tea party is the power broker of the Republican Party, which it currently is right now, then West is a big player and will continue to be," said Kevin Wagner, a political science professor at Florida Atlantic University. "West is the real deal on tea party ideology."

Mr. West's take-charge persona, strongly conservative views, frequent quoting of the Constitution and career military background have made him a folk hero to many and a popular guest on national TV and radio news shows.

He further ingratiated himself with his base by challenging his own party's authority. In December, before he even was sworn in to Congress, he publicly called out then incoming House Majority Leader Eric Cantor of Virginia for scheduling "only" 123 workdays for 2011. He also questioned party leaders for holding several congressional retreats in early 2011, which he considered a waste of time.

The freshman's star power got a huge boost last month when the Conservative Political Action Conference, a key player in conservative politics, gave him the high honor of the closing keynote speech at its annual winter gathering. As one of only two black Republicans in Congress, he has been credited with helping rebut claims that the tea party is a whites-only movement.

"West makes you take a second look at what it means to be Republican and what it means to be a tea partyer and what it means to be conservative in that it really is color-blind," GOP strategist
Ron Bonjean said. "Our fiscal issues aren't black and white. Rather, it's policy, they're American issues, and everybody is affected by them."

But with all the praise and hype, Mr. West himself has downplayed talk of seeking higher office next year, telling The Washington Times last week that he will run for re-election to the House.

"It's very honorable that people think that I have certain qualities, but I've got to get a piece of legislation through, I've got to prove myself as a capable legislator, political leader," Mr. West said.

But he left the door open for a possible later run for a more-prestigious post. "Way down the road, who knows?" he said. "Let's get some things straight up here first."


Mr. West must go beyond the tea party pack if he's serious about running for higher office, national pollster John Zogby said.

"He's a darling of conservatives [but] is he a darling as a [presidential] candidate?" he said. "How many conservative candidates can there be out there?"

Mr. West also faces a double-barreled challenge at the next election; wooing more liberal-minded Republican voters who view the tea party as a radical group while holding onto his base.

"His appeal outside of that [tea party] corner is relatively limited, meaning that he's probably not a very legitimate candidate for trying to appeal to more moderate voters," Mr. Wagner said. "West's significance as a political figure will wax and wane with the tea party."

The lawmaker stuck to his conservative convictions last week by voting against a three-week extension to keep the federal government funded, saying that Congress has had plenty of time to hammer out a budget for fiscal 2011, which is almost half over.

The West seat already has attracted interest. West Palm Beach Mayor Lois Frankel, a Democrat and longtime fixture in South Florida politics, said Monday that she will challenge the incumbent in 2012. Fort Lauderdale businessman Patrick Murphy announced earlier this month that he plans to run for the seat as a Democrat. Speculation also is afoot that Mr. Klein will run again.

With Florida gaining two seats in congressional reapportionment, the demographics of Mr. West's Palm Beach-area district could change significantly — meaning he could be faced with having to win over many new voters.

"That's a tension that every representative faces — being ideologically consistent but at the same time responsive to the demands of the constituency," said Daniel Smith, a University of Florida
political science professor. "So it's hard to imagine in a reconfigured district him not moving toward the [political] center."

Mr. West last week embraced a $21 million federal grant for a new runway at the Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport, saying the grant will generate "at least 11,000 jobs" and will boost tourism in his district. The boast is risky, as his base may view the "pork barrel" move as a betrayal of the tea party movement's fiscal conservatism.

But the runway grant so far has generated little negative feedback on conservative websites. And some West supporters even rushed to his defense.