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2016 ground game: Jeb plays GOP Senate kingmaker with mega Florida cash bash

Taps donor base with Florida fundraiser for Republican Senate candidates

By Kellan Howell

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Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush headlined a joint fundraiser for several top-tier Republican Senate candidates Tuesday in Tampa, Florida, tapping into a wide donor base in the state that could serve as a springboard for his own presidential campaign.

The unusual Florida gathering is part of a series of appearances and fundraisers Mr. Bush has planned over the next several weeks. His schedule has pundits wondering whether the former governor is preparing the ground to announce a White House bid.

"Jeb has been to many events around the country helping Republican candidates," said Mel Sembler, a prominent GOP fundraiser who served on the host committee for Tuesday's fundraiser. "He has already said that he would not be making any decision until the end of the year. This is another one of his efforts to help the Republican cause."

The event, coordinated by a new joint fundraising committee called Floridians for a Senate Majority, will raise campaign cash for Senate hopefuls Cory Gardner of Colorado, Joni Ernst of Iowa, Monica Wehby of Oregon, Tom Cotton of Arkansas and Dan Sullivan of Alaska. All but Mr. Sullivan will attend the event, a sign of strength of Mr. Bush's personal draw.

Organizers expect to raise at least \$500,000 in donations, which will be divided evenly among the candidates.

As the son of former President George H.W. Bush and brother of former President George W. Bush, the two-term Florida governor, 61, has an extensive network he could tap.

But he also could struggle against what analysts have called "Bush fatigue." Even his mother, former first lady Barbara Bush, has poured cold water on the prospect of a third Bush president in a quarter-century.

Mr. Bush's moderate policies on social issues, education and immigration also complicate his effort to win over core Republican voters in the party's nomination battle.

"He will have trouble persuading the base that George W. Bush's brother, who has issues with immigration and Common Core, should be their candidate," said David Boaz, executive vice president of the Washington-based libertarian Cato Institute. "However, if he becomes the nominee, I think those people will fall in line."

After years of hinting that he might be interested, and reports that he was urging fundraisers not to commit too early to rival candidates, the former governor's increase in travel and fundraising has stoked fresh speculation about his political future.

"He has said that he is considering running for president, and the ability that he is showing to [raise funds] demonstrates one of the reasons for thinking that he would be a formidable candidate. He comes with a built-in national fundraising base, which is something that cannot be said for several of the other potential candidates," said Ramesh Ponnuru, a senior editor for National Review and visiting fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.

Mr. Bush's travel itinerary includes a Wednesday event with Senate candidate Thom Tillis in Greensboro, North Carolina, The Wall Street Journal reported. He heads to Wichita, Kansas, on Monday to appear with Sen. Pat Roberts, who faces a tough re-election battle. In October, Mr. Bush will take his first trip to an early presidential primary state to headline a fundraiser in South Carolina for Gov. Nikki R. Haley.

Kristy Campbell, a spokeswoman for Mr. Bush, declined to comment on the former governor's political ambitions.

"Gov. Bush is committed to doing everything he can to help Republicans take back the Senate this November," she said.

Among the party's establishment figures, Mr. Bush might face his toughest competition from New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, whose role as chairman of the Republican Governors Association has allowed him to travel across the country garnering support while raising money for Republican candidates as well.

A RealClearPolitics.com aggregation of early polls for the 2016 Republican nomination puts Mr. Christie at the front of a crowded field with 11.5 percent. Mr. Bush is second at 10.8 percent, and Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky is third at 10.3 percent.

"If Bush is running, then his biggest obstacle is Christie, because they are the two most likely candidates to be the establishment candidate," Mr. Boaz said. "And to some extent, there's jockeying going on to be the insurgent candidate, which might be Rand Paul or [Sen.] Ted Cruz [of Texas] or maybe even [Louisiana Gov.] Bobby Jindal. It's interesting because Republicans usually nominate the next guy in line, and it's not clear who Republicans think is next in line."