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Biggest name in Assembly election isn't on any ballot

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Campaign signs already popping up in the area refer to 1st District Assembly candidates Nelson Albano and Matthew Milam as the "Van Drew Team."

The reference is to state Sen. Jeff Van Drew, D-1, a former state assemblyman who ran for the Senate seat on a ticket with Albano and Milam in 2007. Van Drew is not up for election this year.

Although Albano and Milam are incumbents, the two Democrats' names aren't as well known across the district as their Senate counterpart.

Van Drew, 56, is considered a rising star within his party. He acknowledged he is considering a future run against U.S. Rep. Frank LoBiondo, a popular Republican, for LoBiondo's seat in Congress. LoBiondo is up for re-election next year, but Van Drew has not said whether he'll run against the congressman then, adding the 1st District remains his priority.

Name recognition is always important in an election, but, in the 1st District it could turn out to be a key factor in an Assembly race that political experts predict will be close.

Albano and Milam are running against Republicans Michael Donohue and John McCann in the Nov. 3 election.

All 80 Assembly seats are up for grabs that day. Democrats control the chamber, 48-32.

Donohue and McCann say the Democrats' strategy of riding Van Drew's coattails even though he's not on the ticket proves their opponents can't stand on their own and are controlled by the whims of Van Drew, powerful Camden County Democrats and the state party.

"I have not seen any evidence that either of them have had, or are allowed to have, an original thought," Donohue said of his opponents in a recent interview. "These times demand leadership, not just doing what somebody else tells you to do."

The Democrats' campaign acknowledges Van Drew will be heavily involved in the race between now and Nov. 3.

"He's running like he's on the ticket," campaign spokeswoman Allison Murphy said. "He wants everyone to know he's 100 percent behind Nelson and Matt."

Van Drew will attend political events and shake hands outside supermarkets alongside Albano and Milam throughout the campaign, she said.

In separate interviews, Albano and Milam said they're proud to be associated with Van Drew, but contend they are not beholden to anyone but their constituents.

"With District 1, you have a team," Albano said. "You don't have one individual. It comes down to what is in the best interests of our constituents, what is in the best interest of our district and what is in the best interests of the state of New Jersey."

Milam echoed that sentiment.

"We are not in lockstep with the governor, or anyone with our majority, and we have shown that many times," he said. "If it didn't benefit District 1, we weren't going for it."

The 1st District encompasses Vineland, Millville, Maurice River, Buena, Buena Vista, Somers Point and all of Cape May County.

Albano and Milam are both from Cumberland County; Donohue and McCann are from Cape May County.

Van Drew, a dentist from Dennis Township, said he has a vested interest in the outcome of the race.

"We are going to be coming into the most challenging budget in the state's history next year," he said. "Obviously, it's very important to me who my colleagues are in the Legislature, especially in my own district."

John Weingart, associate director of the nonpartisan Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, said Van Drew's involvement in the race is not likely to have a huge effect on the outcome, but it could register with some voters.

"In a year when there may be lower voter turnout, name recognition can be important," he said. "And being associated with somebody whose name is known and who has a generally positive reputation can also be helpful."
