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Van Drew name on signs but not ballot

By MICHAEL MILLER, Staff Writer, 609-463-6712 | Posted: Friday, September 18, 2009 |

CAPE MAY COURT HOUSE - A state senator is leading the campaign for incumbents in the 1st Legislative District even though he is not on the ballot for another two years.

State Sen. Jeff Van Drew, D-Cape May, Cumberland, Atlantic, is not up for re-election this year, but he is campaigning for incumbent Assemblymen Matt Milam and Nelson Albano in signs and mailers.

"Nelson Albano and Matt Milam are fighting tooth and nail for South Jersey," Van Drew says in campaign mailers distributed across the sprawling district in which Van Drew gets top billing.

Republican challenger Michael Donohue, who is running with John McCann, said Thursday the Democrats are trumpeting Van Drew instead of the genuine top of the ticket, Democratic Gov. Jon S. Corzine.

"The approach is what they're left with because they have to hide from Jon Corzine," Donohue said. "It's a smokescreen to distract from the fact that Albano voted with Jon Corzine 95 percent of the time."

Albano is a two-term incumbent. Milam is finishing his first term. Both campaigned with Van Drew in past elections.

"I'm not going to deny it. There's always the coattail effect. He is a remarkable public official. He has name recognition," Albano said.

But Albano said he and Milam maintain their independence.

"The Republicans can say what they want about this legislative team, that we're Jeff Van Drew's puppets. That couldn't be farther from the truth. But we do work as a team," Albano said. "Everything we do, we do as a team. That makes us effective in the 1st Legislative District."

Before Van Drew became senator, the three-person delegation was composed of both Republicans and Democrats. The bipartisan unit often found itself on the same side of issues - such as tourism, transportation and beach replenishment - that pit southern New Jersey against Trenton and the rest of the state.

"People said I'm not on the ballot. As far as I'm concerned, I am," Van Drew said.

Van Drew said he planned to participate in the door-to-door stumping for votes with his Assembly colleagues. He conceded the campaign gives him a risk-free platform to tout his accomplishments without the head-to-head battle of an election challenge.

"It's a mutually beneficial arrangement," he said. "We do work more as a team than (delegates) in other districts."

Some pundits credited Van Drew for helping Albano and Milam win their respective offices in 2006 and 2008. But gauging Van Drew's or any other candidate's influence is a tricky proposition, said John Weingart, associate director at Rutgers University's Eagleton Institute of Politics.

"It's always hard to tell. He has a chance of gaining a little without risk of losing much," Weingart said. "If the candidates lose, it's because they weren't so good. If they win, it's because maybe they had some help from him."

Weingart said the off-year campaigning also helps Van Drew win name recognition if he decides to pursue higher office,

perhaps with a bid for Congress in 2010.

"If he has any thought for running for Congress, it's good to keep your name in front of people," Weingart said.

But Weingart said Albano and Milam might be smart to promote Van Drew in their district instead of Corzine, despite the contentious gubernatorial race that is dominating state politics this year.

"Regardless of whether Corzine wins, he's not very popular," Weingart said. "It probably helps that the discussion is, 'How close are they to Van Drew?' instead of, 'How close are they to Corzine?'"

Albano said the candidates made a decision early in the campaign to promote the three-member delegation, not the entire Democratic ticket topped by Corzine.

"From the very get-go, before Jon Corzine's poll numbers even came out, before Chris Christie became a candidate, we decided either way that we were going to run our own race," Albano said. "We are running our own campaign. We are the Van Drew team. He is the senior member. That's the way we're going to run it"

As for Van Drew, he was not of a mind to declare his candidacy for federal office Thursday.

"Some day it would be a tremendous honor to serve in Washington. That doesn't mean I'm thinking of it next year," he said.

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