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Jeb Bush Goes to Bat for Bill McCollum

Former governor easy on Rick Scott; attorney general goes for a beating

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GOP fans swamp former Gov. Jeb Bush in Jacksonville. Credit: Kevin Derby, Sunshine State NewsHide

With two weeks remaining until the primary elections and with early voting under way, Attorney General Bill McCollum stumped across the state Monday with former Gov. Jeb Bush -- in what looked and felt like an attempt to rally the troops and pull his flagging GOP gubernatorial campaign up by its bootstraps.

Accompanied by incoming

Senate President Mike Haridopolos, R-Merritt Island, and incoming House Speaker Dean Cannon, R-Winter Park, McCollum and Bush spoke at events in Doral, Jacksonville and Tampa.

"Bill doesn't have to read a poll," said Bush at a speech to an office of the Duval County Republican Party in Jacksonville. "He knows what to do and he is committed to conservative principles."

Bush said he had voted for McCollum earlier in the morning. While he did not -- and said he would not -- attack Scott by name, Bush admitted that he doesn't know much about the health-care executive, who leads McCollum in the polls.

McCollum was not as gentle on Scott as the former governor. "This election is about leadership and character," said McCollum. The attorney general ripped into Scott for his tenure at Columbia/HCA, saying that Scott presided over the largest Medicaid-fraud scandal in American history."

"Who is Rick Scott?" demanded McCollum, repeating a question he asked his rival in a contentious TV debate in Tampa last week. "I don't know."

While a group of Scott backers parading on the sidewalk greeted McCollum and Bush with signs, a tightly packed crowd gave the attorney general a warm reception -- but nowhere near as rousing as the one they gave the former governor. Republicans lined up

to shake Bush's hand, have their photos taken with him and have him autograph old campaign memorabilia.

Bush praised McCollum for his commitment to conservative principles. "He's committed not to raise taxes," said Bush.

The former governor also played political pundit. "I believe Bill is going to win the primary and will be a good candidate in the general election." Bush added that he thought it would be a "tough" election come November against state CFO Alex Sink, the likely Democratic nominee in the race.

Bush said that Monday was the only free day on his schedule before the election, as he continues to promote his foundation and support other Republican candidates -- including one out in Oklahoma on Tuesday. However, Bush said he expects to hit the campaign trail for other Republicans in Florida.

"I like to help people I believe in and I believe in Bill McCollum," said Bush.

While Bush may be backing McCollum, the former governor said the current political climate works against a candidate like the attorney general who was first elected to Congress in 1980.

"People are disgusted with government, disgusted with the political class," said Bush, though he added that in tough economic times it is vital to elect experienced politicians.

Bush unleashed heavy fire on Gov. Charlie Crist who is running as an independent in the U.S. Senate election. "I believe Governor Crist has let us down," said Bush, who added that he thinks the governor put his own personal ambitions ahead of the interests of the people of the state.

Sen. John Thrasher of Jacksonville was in attendance in his role as chairman of the Republican Party of Florida. Thrasher said that, while the battle between Scott and McCollum is competitive, he expects the party to really stand behind the victor. "I've talked to both," he said, noting that the Republicans will have meetings and a dinner in September to heal the wounds. "I expect to be unified."

Responding to Bush accompanying McCollum, the Scott campaign released e-mails arguing that the two men disagreed over a number of issues, from immigration to campaign finance.

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