

South Jersey congressional races likely to get national attention in 2014

By DEREK HARPER, Staff Writer | Posted: Saturday, November 9, 2013 11:45 pm

U.S. Rep. Jon Runyan's surprise announcement that he would not seek re-election all but guarantees South Jersey will be home to ~~the~~ ^{the} most closely watched congressional races in the nation next year.

While candidates are scrambling ~~for~~ position in Runyan's ~~3rd~~ Congressional District in Burlington and Ocean counties, at least ~~one~~ prominent Democrat, Bill Hughes, has already stepped up to take on Republican ~~amb~~ U.S. Rep. Frank LoBiondo in the sprawling eight-county 2nd District.

Now that South Jersey has finished ~~an~~ contentious election, here comes another one.

"So, we thought we would ~~get~~ maybe a week off," joked Brigid Harrison, a Galloway Township resident and Montclair State University professor of law and political science.

"I think these will be some of the most active" in the country, added Sharon Schulman, a political analyst and CEO of external affairs for The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.

The nonpartisan Cook Political Report downgraded LoBiondo's seat from "solidly" to "likely Republican" in mid-October and, after Runyan's announcement, said seat was a "toss-up." At the same time, the Cook Partisan Voting Index said LoBiondo's district leans slightly Democratic, while Runyan's leans slightly Republican. Runyan is a Republican.

If there are contested primary elections, ads could roll out as early as February, Harrison said. These would be powered by the same forces that clogged local airwaves this year: the rise of third-party groups that, following the U.S. Supreme Court Citizens United ruling, are largely exempt from campaign finance and disclosure laws, as long as they don't directly coordinate with

In the 3rd District, Democrats are talking with three or four people who have expressed interest from Ocean and Burlington counties, said Marta Harrison, the Ocean County Democrats' vice chairwoman. Burlington County Freeholder Aimee Belgard on Wednesday became the first to announce she would run.

Third District Republicans seemed anxious to prevent a repeat of 2008, when a Republican congressman's decision to not run touched off a three-way primary that weakened the eventual Republican nominee, Chris Myers, and Democrat John Adler won.

Published reports have listed more than half a dozen potential GOP candidates with designs on the 3rd District seat, but Republican leaders have been officially circumspect.

George Gilmore, the long-time head of Ocean County Republicans, said he anticipated 3rd District Republicans in Ocean and Burlington County would agree to a candidate, but hadn't decided by Friday.

"Right now we're finishing up the election," Gilmore said. "Given a week and we will be happy to discuss it with you."

One 3rd District candidate floated by Republicans seemed particularly improbable: former major league pitcher Al Leiter, 48, currently played as a software executive and baseball commentator.

Property records show Leiter bought a \$2.3 million home in Bay Head, Ocean County, in April 2012. This places his residence in the 4th District about 0.3 miles north of the 3rd District's border in Mantoloking.

Once we get past the primaries,

DHarper@pressofac.com

@dnharper on Twitter