

Romney, Santorum Trade Campaign Digs

BY THOMAS BEAUMONT
Associated Press

CHICAGO — After two Deep South losses, Mitt Romney is intensifying his campaign efforts in the economically challenged Midwest — a friendly region for him — in hopes of regaining his front-runner's momentum when Illinois holds its Republican presidential primary Tuesday.

But the race for Illinois and its cache of 54 delegates is tighter than might have been expected, thanks to Rick Santorum's recent rise in opinion polls. And President Barack Obama, the Democrat they both hope to oust, is making his presence felt, too, in his adopted home state.

Romney is clearly mindful of the threat from Santorum. He and his allies are pouring money into the state, near Michigan where he grew up and his father was governor. Romney won the Michigan primary on Feb. 28.

Logistically, he's also looking to take advantage of Santorum's failure to get the signatures needed to ensure he's on the ballot statewide in Illinois.

And Romney's on the attack. "We are not going to be successful in replacing an economic lightweight if we nominate an economic lightweight," the former Massachusetts governor said Friday during an early morning stop in suburban Rosemont near Chicago. The criticism, focusing on the economy, which is the voters' No. 1 concern, was a one-two punch against both President Barack Obama and Republican Santorum. "I am an economic heavy weight, and I know how to fix this economy," Romney declared.

Romney also began airing a television advertisement in Illinois accusing Santorum, a former two-term senator, of having little understanding of the economy. And he began airing a radio ad pointing to Santorum's crushing defeat for re-election in 2006. Santorum lost his seat in Pennsylvania to Democrat Bob Casey by 18 percentage points.

Santorum, just back from campaigning in Puerto Rico for Sunday's primary there,



ANTONIO PEREZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE/MCT
Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney, left, stands with Rosemont Mayor Bradley A. Stephens as he speaks to the crowd at Pancakes Eggcetera in Rosemont, Illinois, during a campaign stop Friday.

sounded confident despite Romney's heavy organizational and advertising edge — and unconcerned about the criticism of his economic acumen.

Appearing at a Hispanic grocery store in Prospect Heights, Ill., he shot back at his rival. "I believe in a light touch of government where Governor Romney believes in a very heavy touch," Santorum said. "So he is an economic government heavyweight."

Obama was fundraising and campaigning in Illinois, too, on Friday and taking his own shots at the Republicans — for negative campaigning.

Noting he was in "the land of Lincoln," Obama said the Republicans weren't exactly appealing to — in the Civil War president's words — "the better angels of our nature." He

told his audience at a fundraiser in Chicago, "I'm thinking maybe some Lincoln will rub off on them while they're here."

In a wry reference to the heated Republican race, he said, "We've got some guests in Illinois this week. Apparently they have not wrapped up on the other side."

Romney, after Illinois, headed to campaign in Puerto Rico, where he's hoping to win Sunday's primary.

Santorum faces the same obstacles in Illinois that he has in previous contests — a lack of money and campaign organization. But his message that he's the true conservative in the race could resonate strongly in the rural areas of the state. He was spending Friday and Saturday campaigning in some of Illinois' small towns, including Effingham.

Tornado In Michigan Damages More Than 100 Homes

BY MIKE HOUSEHOLDER
Associated Press

DEXTER, Mich. — Sometime after a tornado ripped through this rural Michigan village, a solitary hand rose from the rubble of a destroyed home.

The first officer on the scene reached for the hand and pulled out an elderly man who was shaken but able to walk.

"That's the best part," Deputy Ray Yee said. "Every place I went to, I would have thought I would have found somebody laying there — deceased or whatever. But, knock on wood, everybody was OK."

The twister that hit Dexter on Thursday evening damaged more than 100 homes and destroyed 13. But no one was seriously hurt.

"We're confident that we're not missing anybody," Fire Chief Loren Yates said Friday.

Initial estimates were that the storm had winds of around 135 mph and lingered on the ground for about a half-hour, plowing a path about 10 miles long. The tornado was part of a slow-moving system that also brought large hail, heavy rain and high winds. Gusts downed power lines, sparking fires.

Yates was amazed that no serious injuries were reported. He



KIMBERLY P. MITCHELL/DETROIT FREE PRESS/MCT
A resident puts her hands up over her face after talking about the tornado that damaged her home in the Huron Farms neighborhood in Dexter, Michigan, Friday.

credited warnings issued ahead of the tornado.

By midday Friday, the buzz of chainsaws and the groans of heavy machinery filled the air as families sorted through the remains of houses that had been turned to splinters in the community northwest of Ann Arbor.

"I'm thankful to God that there were no serious injuries or fatalities with all this devastation," said Mark Olexa, standing in front of a 50-foot tree that was uprooted in front of his home.

A nearby pizza shop and dry

cleaners weren't spared.

"It was eerie this morning," said Olexa, a handyman and commercial property manager. "There was a heavy fog. And it added to the horrific-ness of the event."

A few blocks from Olexa's home, Ron Henderson stood on his front lawn, surveying the damage.

The previous evening, he was watching television when the announcer said the storm might take aim at Dexter.

"And it did," he said with a

chuckle.

Henderson, his wife and son didn't have time to get to the basement of their home, and instead covered by the bed as the tornado blew past.

About two dozen homes in the Huron Farms neighborhood "are pretty much unlivable," Sharon Carty said. "One house, the whole front of the house is gone. Folks whose houses were hit are pretty stunned. We don't get too many tornadoes around here."

Carty said she and her family heard the first weather siren around 5:15 p.m. and were in their basement when the tornado struck. Their house was untouched.

Perry Samson, an atmospheric science professor at the University of Michigan, said it's "relatively rare" to have such a powerful tornado in the state at this time of year. In January 2008, with temperatures in the 60s, tornadoes developed in southeastern Wisconsin. Temperatures topped 70 on Thursday in Michigan.

"Extra moisture and extra heat certainly contributed to the instability that we had. ... We didn't see this coming," Samson said Friday from the Ann Arbor campus, 10 miles from Dexter. "We're still scratching our heads."

North Korea Says It Will Launch Rocket

PYONGYANG, North Korea (AP) — North Korea announced plans Friday to blast a satellite into space on the back of a long-range rocket, a provocative move that could jeopardize a weeks-old agreement with the U.S. exchanging food aid for nuclear concessions.

The North agreed to a moratorium on long-range launches as part of the deal with Washington, but it argues that its satellite launches are part of a peaceful space program that is exempt from any international disarmament agreements. The U.S., South Korea and other critics say the rocket technology overlaps with belligerent uses and condemn the satellite program as a disguised way of testing military missiles in defiance of a U.N. ban.

The launch is to take place three years after a similar launch in April 2009 drew widespread censure.

In Washington, the U.S. State Department called the announcement of the launch "highly provocative."

"Such a missile launch would pose a threat to regional security and would also be inconsistent with North Korea's recent undertaking to refrain from long-range missile launches," State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said in a statement, calling on Pyongyang to abide by its international obligations.

Gas Prices Threaten Economy If They Persist

WASHINGTON (AP) — Inflation remains tame throughout the U.S. economy, with one big exception: gas prices.

Those higher prices haven't derailed a steadily improving economy. But if they surpass \$4 or \$5 a gallon, experts fear Americans could pull back on spending, and job growth could stall, posing a potentially serious threat to the recovery.

And the longer prices remain high, the more they could imperil President Barack Obama's re-election hopes.

A few weeks ago, economists generally agreed that the economy was in little danger from higher gas prices as long as job growth remained strong. But fears are now mounting that gas prices could begin to weaken consumer confidence.

The average pump price nationwide is \$3.83 a gallon. Energy analysts say it's bound to climb higher in the weeks ahead.

"It's a thorn in the side of the consumer and businesses," said Chris Christopher, an economist at IHS Global Insight. The economy this year "would have been better and stronger if we didn't have to deal with this."

So far, higher prices aren't undermining the economic recovery, which is getting a lift from strong job creation. It would take a big jump — to around \$5 a gallon — before most economists would worry that growth would halt and the economy would slide into another recession.

That's because an improving economy is somewhat insulated from any threat posed by higher prices at the pump.

The risk is that gas prices could eventually slow growth by causing some people to cut spending on other goods, from appliances and furniture to electronics and vacations. Gasoline purchases provide less benefit for the U.S. economy because about half of the revenue flows to oil-exporting nations, though U.S. oil companies and gasoline retailers also benefit.

Skydiver Aims To Jump From 23 Miles Up

"Fearless Felix" Baumgartner has jumped 2,500 times from planes and helicopters, as well as some of the highest landmarks and skyscrapers on the planet — the Christ the Redeemer statue overlooking Rio de Janeiro, the Millau Viaduct in southern France, the 101-story Taipei 101 in Taiwan.

He's also leapt face-first into a pitch-dark, 620-foot-deep cave in Croatia — his most dangerous feat yet, he says, but soon to be outdone.

This summer, Baumgartner hopes to hurtle toward Earth at supersonic speed from a record 23 miles up, breaking the sound barrier with only his body.

He made it more than halfway there during a critical dress rehearsal Thursday, ascending from the New Mexico desert in a helium balloon and jumping from more than 13 miles up. He is believed to be only the third person to leap from such a high altitude and free fall to a safe landing — and the first to do so in 50 years. The record is Air Force test pilot Joe Kittinger's jump from 102,800 feet — 19.5 miles — in 1960.

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