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Contest for 36th begins to heat up

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STAR-LEDGER STAFF

The race for the 36th Legislative District in November could be one of the most closely watched contest in the state -- and the money already has started rolling in.

Democratic Assemblyman Gary Schaer is leading the money chase, having raised more than \$400,000, mostly from associations and groups from outside the district. Political watchers say that could be an indication of how intense the race will be, as Republicans look to capitalize on Gov. Jon Corzine's sagging poll numbers at the top of the ticket.

More than 90 percent of Schaer's money came from health care groups, insurance companies, labor leaders, law firms and Trenton lobbyists. It is unclear how much his Republican challengers will raise, but the state Republican Committee will send volunteers and logistical support to a district race they see as winnable.

"Absolutely this is one of our top targets," said Jay Webber, chairman of the Republican State Committee.

Democrats Frederick Scalera of Nutley and Schaer, of Passaic, will try to beat back GOP challengers Carmen Pio Costa and Don Dioro in a rematch of a very close 2007 campaign. The four candidates are vying for two seats in the Assembly. The district includes parts of Bergen and Passaic counties as well as Nutley in Essex County.

"This is a district that has historically been a competitive district," said Derek Roseman, spokesman for the Democratic Assembly Campaign Committee. "We have no doubt Fred and Gary will win, but the state Republicans have made no bones about it; they will make a play in 36. We're not going to let them just walk in."

Two years ago, Republicans mounted a strong challenge on a limited budget against a better-funded Schaer and Scalera team. Schaer beat Dioro by 2,424 votes out of 24,950 votes cast.

"The Republicans did surprisingly well," said Don Linky, a senior policy fellow at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. "In general, people were surprised at how well they did. (This year) the Republicans statewide have targeted the district as a swing district, so there should be more money being steered into the district from the Republican State Committee, and other political action committees."

That's good news for Pio Costa and Dioro; a review of primary financial reports shows the Democrats raised \$64 for every \$1 the Republicans received as of June 22, the latest data available. The \$10,825 in the GOP took in was less than what Schaer collected from law firms alone.

The first state reporting deadline for the general election is Oct. 15, so there is no public data to compare the candidates today.

As a political institution for more than a decade, and sitting Passaic City Council president, Schaer has little local financial support for his Assembly re-election campaign. A review of Schaer's campaign finance reports show that an overwhelming majority of his financial backers are companies and trade organizations that deal in health care.

Schaer said he has been aggressive in his fundraising because of the GOP's desire to unseat him and Scalera. He has shied away from soliciting in his hometown to avoid any connection between his City Council job and the Assembly race.

"I serve as council president and I am very concerned that people in Passaic not see a linkage between one

and the other," Schaer said. "I have gone out of my way not to solicit (in Passaic)."

First elected to the Assembly in 2005, Schaer holds influential appointments on two of the most powerful legislative committees: chairman of the Financial Institutions and Insurance Committee and vice chairman of the Budget Committee.

As vice chairman of budget, Schaer deals with matters such as Medicaid funding that are the lifeblood for medical facilities around the state. Since last year, Schaer's campaign received more about \$150,000 from associations that are part of that vast industry.

The New Jersey Healthcare Association, which donated \$5,100 to Schaer's campaign, is a Hamilton-based coalition of nursing homes and assisted-living and residential-care facilities. The group's president, Paul Langevin, said he first met Schaer when he sponsored a bill that would require nursing homes to serve food that meets residents' religious dietary requirements -- a measure Langevin's association opposed.

"We've been talking to him ever since on many issues," Langevin said. "Given his position on the budget committee and with Medicaid the number one payer in nursing care in New Jersey and the country, that is always a concern to us and we are always up for a cut."

Schaer said the campaign dollars he has raised will go toward funding a difficult and expensive competition.

"The governor's numbers are down in our district and in order get our message out, we need to do that," he said. "My numbers are good, but it's going to be a very expensive race."

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