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Giuliani is wooing California's conservatives for possible '08 bid He's scheduled to be keynote speaker for state GOP convention

- Carla Marinucci, Chronicle Political Writer
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Former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, a moderate Republican and possible presidential candidate, is working to strengthen his hand in California by scheduling a high-profile appearance and quietly gathering support from some of the state's staunchest conservatives.

State GOP board members were informed by party officials last week that Giuliani is scheduled to be the keynote speaker for the state Republican Party convention in February in Sacramento, sources said.

That appearance will catapult what was expected to be a fairly routine GOP gathering into a national event -- and is almost certain to ramp up the increasingly active parade of presidential hopefuls of both parties coming to California to court donors in a state viewed as the wealthiest source of campaign cash.

Giuliani, called "America's mayor" after his formidable performance in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, already has established a camaraderie with California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger -- a Republican in the same moderate, bipartisan mold who also supports gay rights, abortion rights and stem cell research.

Despite those more liberal positions on social issues, Giuliani is gaining the backing of some California Republicans well known to the state's most conservative grassroots base: financier and former gubernatorial candidate Bill Simon and Republican political consultant and Internet publisher Steve Frank.

Simon has been a longtime friend of Giuliani, and worked as an assistant U.S. attorney in New York under Giuliani, who was then the U.S. attorney.

Simon was on Wall Street and at breakfast with Giuliani on Sept. 11, 2001, when two planes hit the World Trade Center at the start of a terrorist attack that killed about 3,000 people.

Simon -- who was traveling Friday and could not be reached for comment -- has been tapped to help Giuliani with fundraising in California, GOP sources said.

Former state party chair Shawn Steel, in his most recent blog on Jon Fleischman's GOP Web site, FlashReport.org, said "Simon, a prodigious fundraiser himself, active in political and charitable circles, promises to make California the most sought after location for Republicans presidential seekers anywhere in the country."

Steel said Simon's effort comes as other Republican presidential contenders, Sen. John McCain of Arizona and Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, also have begun to reach out to heavyweight fundraisers in California.

Frank, a former consultant to Simon and a conservative who publishes the California Political News & Views newsletter, and has been a harsh critic of Schwarzenegger on the right -- but he confirmed last week that he also will be supporting Giuliani's effort.

Frank said the former New York mayor is in the best position to take the White House in 2008 against a roster of potential Democratic challengers who include New York Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, Illinois Sen. Barack Obama, former North Carolina Sen. John Edwards and even Al Gore, the Democrats' 2000 presidential nominee.

While conservatives may have differences with Giuliani on social policies, Frank said, "I have no differences with a guy who, as mayor, cut or eliminated 23 different taxes, and dramatically cut crime in New York. ... Like Ronald Reagan, agree or disagree, he will look you in the eye and say, 'This is where I stand.' There's a trust factor."

Giuliani's intensified California activities came in a week in which he placed first on two high-profile presidential preference polls. A Washington Post/ABC News poll had the New Yorker besting McCain 34-26 percent in a head-to-head primary matchup. And a NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll last week also put Giuliani ahead of McCain, Romney and other possible 2008 Republican candidates.

The former New York mayor has formed an exploratory committee to run for president and will hold his first official campaign fundraiser this week.

Bill Whalen, a research fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford, said the latest polls highlight why Giuliani could appeal to conservatives who "would like him, ironically, for the same reason moderates like him -- electability."

"The No. 1 way for him to appeal is the polls that show him going head to head with Hillary Clinton," he says.

But some Democrats said that although Giuliani may be interesting to

Republican voters in a state where Schwarzenegger was recently re-elected in a landslide, he will have a far greater challenge elsewhere in a process that favors candidates who appeal to the overwhelmingly conservative GOP primary voters.

"How will Rudy Giuliani walk into a living room of evangelicals in Dubuque and explain to them that on three issues they care most about" -- abortion, stem cell research and gay rights -- "that he's got a fundamentally different position?" said Chris Lehane, a leading Democratic strategist and former spokesman for the Gore 2000 presidential race and Bill Clinton's White House. "To them, his positions are more in line with a supervisor's seat in San Francisco than a Republican presidential candidate."

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