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Sunday, September 21, 2008 | 1B

Obama on attack in Florida

He plans to come to Pinellas County soon to prepare for the McCain debate Friday.



Barack Obama hasn't said where he will stay in Pinellas County.

BY ALEX LEARY
Times Staff Writer

JACKSONVILLE — Sen. Barack Obama, who wrapped up a two-day sweep through Florida by repeatedly bashing John McCain at a rally here Saturday, is already preparing for a quick return.

He is expected to arrive in Pinellas County as early as Tuesday, to prep for Friday's debate against Sen. McCain at the University of Mississippi.

Sequestering himself in Florida is

a tactical decision, affording Obama privacy as well as media exposure in the battleground state where a new *St. Petersburg Times*/Bay News 9 poll shows a dead heat.

Campaign officials confirmed the visit but would not say where Obama will stay or whether he would hold a public event. His strategy follows the lead of Al Gore, who went to Longboat Key in 2000 to cram for his debate with George W. Bush.

On Saturday, Obama's outdoor rally drew more than 12,000 people

— not including thousands forced to watch from outside the fence at Metropolitan Park.

His message in the solidly conservative city was clear: strike at McCain on economic issues. "We can't steer ourselves out of this crisis with a driver who wants to go the same way — into the ditch," Obama said, linking McCain to the Bush administration.

He urged the crowd not to be "hoodwinked" and "bamboozled" by the barrage of TV ads his rival is

airing. Many cheered — "Get him, Barack!" one woman yelled.

Obama said McCain's solution to the crisis was to blame his opponent. (McCain has two ads closely linking Obama to Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, which are at the heart of the mortgage meltdown.)

He referenced McCain's comments in Jacksonville last Monday, the day Lehman Bros. collapsed. McCain had said the "fundamentals of the economy are strong," words that pro-
» See OBAMA, 7B

Rouson is no typical politico

The state lawmaker is outrageous but able to get things done.

BY CRISTINA SILVA
Times Staff Writer

ST. PETERSBURG — It's half-time at a St. Petersburg Catholic High School football game, and state Rep. Darryl Rouson's campaign treasurer is offering advice on an anniversary present for his wife.

"You mean more than this?" Rouson, 53, asks mischievously, gyrating his hips back and forth in a sexual motion as a reporter watches.

It is classic Rouson: outrageous, unpredictable, completely arresting.

Rouson, who is seeking re-election to state House District 55, is the rare politician who has turned an unattractive personal history — drug addiction, bankruptcy, divorce, homelessness, civil disobedience, professional misconduct — into a triumphant tale of redemption.

Rouson, a lawyer and former community activist, enjoys wide influence. He was the only state legislator to serve on the powerful Taxation and Budget Reform Commission. His district spans four counties: Sarasota, Manatee, Pinellas and Hillsborough.

His admirers occupy the highest ranks of Florida politics: Gov. Charlie Crist, Department of Juvenile Justice Secretary Frank Peterman, St. Petersburg Mayor Rick Baker. He won 60 percent of the vote in August's Democratic primary, easily topping his lone challenger.

Rouson's hometown connections, outgoing personality and grass roots activism have helped
» See ROUSON, 5B



Rep. Darryl Rouson isn't shy about discussing past troubles.

Rays in playoffs

Rays of hope shine brightly

The team's entry into playoffs leaves fans giddy with delight.

BY STEPHANIE GARRY
AND CURTIS KRUEGER
Times Staff Writers

ST. PETERSBURG — When the moment finally arrived, Roy and Nancy Casto were ready.

The minute Evan Longoria caught the final out, the Castos pulled out a blue-and-gold banner signed by the team.

When an announcer told the crowd how to get postseason tickets, Nancy said to herself, "Already done it."

When Longoria hopped on the dugout, spraying champagne, Nancy held up a banner that read: "Longo: Rookie of the Year."

From their seats padded with cushions from the inaugural game, the couple were prepared for their team's biggest victory yet. Nancy lifted a homemade sign that captured their faithful journey through 11 seasons: "WE BELIEVE"

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For truly die-hard fans, Saturday's win was dreamlike and joyous. Rays fans screamed into the night. They skipped down the sidewalk, fired up the grill and grinned behind cigars. They gulped tall boys at Ferg's, sat in traffic and honked their horns.

And, of course, they clanged their cowbells.

After a solid decade of "wait until next year," they finally saw proof that this is next year. The Rays are going to the playoffs, after beating the Minnesota Twins 7-2. And it only took 1,770 games to get there.

Fans celebrated on both sides of the bay. In Tampa, Jeremy Lett, 32, watched the Rays clinch with friends at the Press Box on Dale Mabry Highway.

"I've been a fan for seven years, and I've watched terrible baseball for seven years, so now that they're winning, it's great to see it."

Back at the Trop, 25-year-old Brad Robison wore a green-and-purple Baldelli jersey as he walked out of the Trop blowing a horn. "This is amazing," he said.

He's been a fan since the first draft in 1996 and has put up with
» See FANS, 4B

Clarification

Republican pollster Kellyanne Conway is "somewhat optimistic" about passage of a state constitutional amendment that would ban gay marriage, noting that it has majority support across many voter groups. Conway said the current economic turmoil makes voters more likely to support the status quo on cultural matters, which would mean voting for the amendment. A story Saturday would mean voting for the amendment. A story Saturday would mean voting for the amendment. A story Saturday would mean voting for the amendment.



Florida Crystals' Okeelanta sugar refinery, where piles of "scrap" sugar wait to be refined, burns cane waste for energy.

Cane's harvest of energy

Florida Crystals asks utilities and the state to plug renewables.

BY DAVID ADAMS
Times Staff Writer

OKEELANTA — For the past 11 years, Florida Crystals, the nation's largest sugar producer, has powered its massive refining operation by burning leftover sugarcane.

"We grow our own electricity," said Stephen Clarke, who directs industrial research for Florida Crystals, referring to the sugarcane fiber waste, known as bagasse, that provides half of the annual fuel for the furnaces.

When there is excess electricity, the company sells it to utilities all over the state, providing enough energy to power 60,000 homes and eliminating the need for 1-million barrels of foreign oil per year, the company says.

Now the company wants to play a larger role in the state's renewable energy industry by expanding its electricity generation and ultimately moving into the production of bio-fuels such as ethanol.

Despite a statewide push for more renewable energy, Florida Crystals says it is running into opposition from utility companies and state regulators.

"We have a market that's not working for renewables," said Gus Cepero, vice president of business development at Florida Crystals.

Sugar for fuel

Last year Florida Crystals won a \$1-million state grant with Florida International University to explore ways to produce ethanol from sugarcane waste by breaking down its tough fiber exterior to get at the sugars contained within. It is also working with the University of Florida on building an ethanol plant using nonfood plants.

On the Web

For more information on ethanol derived from sugarcane, go to the Fueling Station at blogs.tampabay.com/energy.

Inside

Sweet sorghum grown around Lake Okeechobee could fuel cars. 4B

Unlike other states, Florida has been slow to adopt a renewable portfolio standard, a statewide mandate to encourage production of greener power.

In July 2007 Gov. Charlie Crist signed an
» See ENERGY, 4B



Source: Florida Geographic Data Library
DARLA CAMERON | Times

City streets bloom with goodwill

About 770 volunteers pitch in to spiff up and fix up neighborhoods for Carefest.

BY ANNE LINDBERG
Times Staff Writer

ST. PETERSBURG — The chores were typical weekend tasks, but they had a deeper meaning for hundreds of volunteers who spread out through this city Saturday morning.

About 770 volunteers joined in the annual St. Petersburg Carefest, a program that helps participants give back to the community.

In some cases, the recipients were homeowners who had been cited by city code enforce-

ment officers, but were too poor or old to perform the needed work to bring their homes into compliance. The improvements included painting, minor roof repair, yard and garden work, and gutter repair.

Other recipients were communities or nonprofit groups that needed such things as painting, window repairs, community signs installed, and litter picked up.

The volunteers were a mixed bunch — members of local
» See CAREFEST, 7B



LARA CERRI | Times

Priya Patel, 22, left, and Bhavi Patel, 20, right, spruce up the area around a Childs Park sign in St. Petersburg on Saturday.

Vendors smell super payday at Super Bowl

Potential goods run from T-shirts to NFL turtles and beyond.

BY JANET ZINK
Times Staff Writer

TAMPA — The Super Bowl isn't just a championship football game.

It's a chance for people to make lots of money.

"Everybody's trying to make a buck off of Super Bowl," said Joe Papy, the city of Tampa's business tax supervisor. "We even had a *Deal or No Deal* producer call in. They have a contestant who wants to be a hot dog vendor at the Super Bowl. I referred them to the NFL."

The city is working on a "clean zone" ordinance that will set rules for vendors who want to sell merchandise in the days before and during the 2009 Super Bowl, which will be played at Raymond James Stadium on Feb. 1.

"They want to sell shoes out there; they want to sell stuffed animals," Papy said.

One person called and asked about selling turtles with the NFL logo on their shells.
» See VENDORS, 7B