

Where's Matt Gaetz? Not in his district; 'He's everywhere but here'

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Campaign records show Gaetz cutting checks to crisis communication consultants and defense attorney that represented Gotti and Epstein

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NICEVILLE — Republican U.S. Rep. Matt Gaetz stood in front of hometown supporters March 29 and declared that he didn't need to worry whether congressional leaders of either party liked him or not, because the people in his district had his back.

"You" he told the cheering crowd, "give me the ability to approach this job in a much different way."

The day after the Niceville speech, the New York Times published a story about Gaetz being under investigation for possible sex trafficking and engaging in sex with a 17-year-old girl.

The last appearance:Matt Gaetz 'Boggy Boy' tells Niceville audience his time in Washington is nearing an end



Federal authorities are said to be looking at Gaetz's ties to his former close friend Joel Greenburg, who has pleaded guilty to sex trafficking of a minor girl. Greenburg, the former tax collector in Seminole County, is reportedly cooperating with authorities and rumors abound that Gaetz could be indicted.



Gaetz has repeatedly denied any wrongdoing, but he hasn't specifically addressed the federal investigation, or any other, with the people he represents in Florida's 1st Congressional District.



Once easily accessible to constituents and local media alike, the congressman could be counted on to discuss issues at regular "Open Gaetz" forums. But Gaetz hasn't made an announced public appearance in Escambia, Okaloosa, Santa Rosa or Walton counties since the March 29 event — although he did drop in at a Navarre diner recently and speak to customers.



Just last week, Gaetz was in Melbourne, where he announced plans to begin a "Florida Man Freedom Tour." Florida Today reported he said the purpose of the tour is to "band together and celebrate being Floridians."

"He's everywhere but here, and I have a real problem with that," said Greg Merk, who ran as a Republican against Gaetz in 2020 and has pre-filed to face him in a GOP primary again next year.

The allegations Gaetz is facing have undoubtedly forced him to alter his "different way" approach to constituent service. Once a popular guest on Fox News, Gaetz is no longer a favorite interview subject on the conservative cable channel.

Matt Gaetz and Marjorie Taylor Greene rally

But he has found other ways to stay in the spotlight. Gaetz has been roaming the country since April, most recently in the company of Georgia U.S. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, speaking out on hot button topics like the mistreatment of those incarcerated following the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol.

Gaetz's campaign finance reports show disbursements for 18 flights between April 1 and May 16, and meal and lodging expenses from places like New York, Texas, Washington D.C. and Cleveland, Ohio. He also made stops in some Florida destinations such as The Villages, Gainesville and Coral Gables.



Since announcing his so-called "Put America First" tour May 7, Gaetz appears to be traveling, lodging and dining with funds from a joint fundraising committee of the same name he established with Greene. Put America First spent \$287,036 between May 15 and June 30, including \$3,510 for travel and lodging between May 15 and June 7.



Before embarking upon their speaking tour, Gaetz and Greene each contributed \$150,000 from their campaigns to establish the committee. As of June 30, a fund that grew as large as \$359,345, with just under \$60,000 in individual contributions, had dwindled to \$72,309.



The allegations:Florida congressman Matt Gaetz reportedly being investigated for sexual contact with teen

Is Matt Gaetz going to run again? 'I'm not going to be a lifer'

Gaetz is halfway through his third term. At the March 29 Niceville event, he hinted that his days in Washington D.C. were numbered.

"I'm not going to be a lifer in this job," he said. "I think four years to eight years sounds about right. I may not stay eight years. Six years has a good ring to it. I hope you're not disappointed in me if I don't stay more than a decade."

Could he seek a state office?:Gaetz alludes to bid for Commissioner of Agriculture in 2022

Gaetz has pre-filed with the Florida Division of Elections to run again, but his March 29 comments sowed seeds of doubt, if not in the minds of Republicans, at least in those of his opponents, particularly after news broke of the scandal that ties him to Greenburg.

"Perhaps Gaetz, who has a long career of surviving scandals, will finally be brought down by these charges. We believe it is likely that he will either resign or be removed from Congress," Okaloosa County Democratic Party President Tracey Tapp said in a memo to party faithful sent shortly after the Niceville event. "If that's the case there will be a special election to replace him. We need to start preparing now for this election."

Phil Ehr, who was a Republican for 30 years before losing faith in the party and becoming a Democrat, has signed on to challenge Gaetz for a second time in 2022.

Ehr said he's expecting Gaetz's congressional colleagues to expel him if a federal indictment comes down.



"I have faith enough Republicans will stand up to him and that he will not be seen on a ballot again," Ehr said.



To say Ehr and the Democratic Party face imposing odds in trying to defeat Gaetz or any Republican come November 2022 is an understatement. Florida's 1st Congressional District is one of the most conservative in the country.



Gaetz was among the first Republicans to back the 2016 candidacy of former President Donald Trump, who is still widely popular in Florida's Panhandle. He also is part of a formidable political family and has been consistently re-elected by large margins.

Republican Party leaders across the four-county 1st District are so confident in GOP supremacy that they say they have not made contingency plans to cover themselves if Gaetz doesn't run in 2022.

"This is a safe district for Republicans and I'm sure there would be all kinds of people willing to run for that office if Matt Gaetz does decide to step down," said John Roberts, the head of the Republican Party in Escambia County. "We're assuming he will run for re-election and

will win easily if he does. And if he doesn't, we'll have a donnybrook to see who'll replace him. We have no shortage of qualified people."

Both Roberts and Bill Fletcher, the Republican Party chairman in Walton County, said they're confident Gaetz will run again because they believe the allegations against him are not true.

"I've had a lot of reporters call me and ask about an indictment, and I ask them if anyone at the Justice Department had confirmed the congressman was being investigated, because what I keep seeing is 'some anonymous source says,'" Roberts said. "That's how the media plays something. A story quoting an anonymous source is published in some outlet, the liberal and even some moderate media jump on it, and off we go."

Merk — Gaetz's would-be Republican primary opponent — said he knows he won't defeat Gaetz unless an indictment is handed down.

"There is overwhelming support for Matt Gaetz, and everyone is calling what they're seeing about him fake news," Merk said. "I believe an indictment will come in the next six months, so I will stay the course. I don't know if that will be enough for him not to run, but I will stay the course."

Gaetz did not respond to requests for comment.

Campaign records tell a story as Gaetz looks to defense attorney that represented Gotti and Epstein

While Gaetz isn't talking, his recent campaign finance reports suggest where the congressman's priorities lie.

Between Jan. 1 and June 30 of 2021, Gaetz ranked 12th among all U.S. House members for the amount of contributions received with \$3,277,058. He ranks sixth in spending, having disbursed \$3,296,948. As of June 30 he had \$1.58 million on hand.

By comparison, Florida Republican 18th District Rep. Brian Mast ranked 31st among House members, raising \$1,749,636 between Jan. 1 and June 30. He spent \$1,023,881 during the same time period, records show.

Whereas Gaetz paid for 18 flights between April 1 and May 16, documents indicate Mast's campaign coffer has not paid for a single commercial flight for the year to date.

Florida Democratic 23rd District Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz raised \$397,492 and spent \$263,000 for the same period. Her campaign chest paid for six commercial flights between Jan. 1 and June 30, according to records.

A much larger proportion of Gaetz's political contributions are coming from outside of Florida as compared to Mast or Wasserman Schultz. For Gaetz \$167,715 of his \$3.2 million has come from inside the state, records show. Mast has raised \$336,053 of his \$1.7 million in Florida. For Wasserman Schultz, \$192,825 of \$397,492 came from Florida sources.



Gaetz has also recently spent a considerable amount on legal services.



Since September 2020 the Gaetz campaign has spent \$47,168 for legal services rendered by Venable LLP, with the largest and most recent payout being \$21,224 in February of this year.

On June 14, his campaign laid out another \$25,000 in legal consulting fees to the Zuckerman Spaeder firm out of Maryland, and on June 28 paid an additional \$25,000 in campaign money to the Mark Fernich Law Office of New York.



Zuckerman Spaeder's website states a third of its attorneys have spent time in government positions "presiding over important policy issues." That experience pays off in trying cases "in matters that capture headlines," the website states.

Fernich, a criminal defense attorney whose website promises "substance over style and quality over quantity," lists convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, gangster John Gotti and drug cartel leader Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman among his former clients.

Gaetz has also spent a considerable amount of his campaign contributions on political consultants, including \$300,000 that went to a company called Logan Circle Group Inc. on April 8, about a week after the criminal investigation was reported.

The Logan Circle Group advertises itself as an agency adept at "crafting the stories" for companies, brands and high profile individuals. Among specialties listed on its website are crisis communicating, general consulting and media training.

"The best defense against bad press is a well-equipped team who has taken every possible angle of a story into account," the company's website states.

The campaign paid another \$115,138 to the Logan Circle Group on April 15 and \$35,000 more the next day. The agency received another \$152,939 from the Friends of Matt Gaetz fund on April 23, \$135,600 on May 5, and \$87,000 on May 14.

Before the allegations arose against him, Gaetz also dipped into his own campaign funds to assist five Republican members of the Florida state Senate with \$1,000 contributions to their campaigns.

Four of the candidates — Ileana Garcia, Ana Maria Rodriguez, Manny Diaz and Ray Rodrigues — serve districts in the Miami-Dade County region. Another, Jason Brodeur, serves Seminole County in Central Florida, where Greenburg was tax collector.

Brodeur and Garcia have both been touched by an election scandal. In both of their 2020 races, no-party-affiliation "ghost" candidates funded with thousands of dollars in "dark money" from the same source were also on the ballot. Campaign mailers for both ghost candidates made them appear to be left-leaning, an apparent effort to siphon votes from the Democrats in those races. Former state Sen. Frank Artiles is charged with paying off the ghost candidate who entered the Garcia race. His trial is Aug. 30.

More: Ghost candidates, dark money and a 'winning formula': Florida corruption case linked to Republican insiders

Gaetz also refunded 127 political contributions worth more than \$88,000 between Jan. 7 and June 30. Seventy of those refunds were issued between April 1 and June 30, including 28 in the month of April as allegations against Gaetz arose.

While the practice of refunding contributions is not uncommon, the number Gaetz has refunded seems unusually high. By comparison, Mast, R-Fort Pierce, has issued seven refunds this year in the amount of \$3,781.

Since reducing his public appearances in the 1st Congressional District in early April, Gaetz has spent campaign dollars lavishly as he's appeared in other parts of the country.

On April 7 he paid \$1,292 for several flights. On April 9, another \$1,052 went out for airfare and lodging at an in-state Courtyard Marriott. On April 10, \$271 was spent on lodging at the Intercontinental Hotel, along with \$521 for catering from the Maia House restaurant in Coral Gables.

Between April 12 and April 24 another \$1,028 was spent on airfare and \$994 covered the cost of dining at two restaurants, one in New York and the other at the Trump International Hotel in Washington D.C.

Gaetz has continued to spend on travel via the Put America First tour. On the day the tour kicked off in The Villages, the campaign paid \$259 for lodging at a Gainesville Hampton Inn and Suites, \$412 for transportation by Turo Inc. — the world's largest car sharing marketplace — and \$555 for catering from The World of Beer.

The next day, the Gaetz campaign spent \$526 for airfare, \$234 to Hotels.com to cover the cost of lodging in Texas and another \$73 in Uber and Turo transportation expenses.

Just under \$1,380 came out of the campaign fund May 10-11. Expenses included \$240 for airfare, \$814 for catering at the Brownwood Hotel in The Villages, and \$324 for parking and a meal at Trump International Hotel in Washington D.C.

Despite all the spending, evidence suggests that the Gaetz-Greene tour hasn't been particularly successful.

The pair traveled to Texas, but weren't placed on the speaking agenda at the Conservative Political Action Conference where Trump was the featured speaker. Gaetz was forced to call his own impromptu news conference.

A handful of speaking engagements have also been canceled by would-be hosts afraid of courting the controversy Gaetz and Greene bring.

On July 27, Gaetz was heckled off the stage at a press conference in front of the U.S. Department of Justice headquarters. The event had been scheduled to advocate on behalf of Jan. 6 rioters on the same day a congressional committee appointed to investigate the Capitol riot met for the first time.

On July 29, Gaetz made an unannounced appearance to obtain a tour of the District of Columbia Central Detention Facility where he and Greene said they wanted to ascertain that the rights of inmates taken into custody following the Jan. 6 insurrection were not being violated.

More: Florida emerges as a cradle of the insurrection as Jan. 6 Capitol riot arrests keep piling up

Sandra Atkinson, the chairman of the Okaloosa County Republican Party's Executive Committee, posted footage of Gaetz and Greene being turned away at the jail on the county party's Facebook page. That sparked an angry response from Mark Franks, a former OCREC chairman.

"With everything going on in our district and state, this is the crap you choose to focus on? A traveling circus? Please get serious about things that matter, such as getting Governor (Ron) DeSantis re-elected so our state isn't shut down and our businesses ruined," Franks wrote in a comment.

"I pray that we get a representative for CD1 that has a maturity level above third grade and actually works for his or her constituents," Franks continued. "Our district is the laughing stock of the country right now. Maybe you don't realize that. CD1 has an amazing history and incredible people. They deserve better."

Michelle Salzsman, who in 2020 defeated incumbent Republican Mike Hill to become the GOP's District 1 state representative, said that while party leaders aren't discussing a life after Gaetz, donors, business people and community leaders have broached the subject.

"The idea is really to consolidate efforts so that we have a good candidate, a solid candidate," she said, adding that no elected state legislators are considering opposing the incumbent congressman right now. "It has nothing to do with what Matt Gaetz is doing or his state of affairs. It's smart political discussion to look at options."