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New Jersey tea party members prove to be rivals for Republicans

By JULIET FLETCHER Statehouse Bureau | Posted Sunday, April 11, 2010 |

Members of the conservative tea party movement showed their political colors by carrying banners at protest rallies.

But 18 months after the anti-tax movement's inception, local and New Jersey members show they are now trying to influence public affairs by moving into mainstream political campaigns and taking on public officials.

The New Jersey branches have already sprinted ahead of the national organizations by launching a court battle to recall U.S. Sen. Robert Menendez, a Democratic incumbent and the region's highest-profile target.

And the movement's growth is now a factor in the Republican race for the congressional seat in the 2nd District — where two self-described tea party candidates initially announced they would challenge incumbent Republican Rep. Frank LoBiondo in his party's June primary.

"We're still here," said George Oshman, a Linwood resident who helped found one of the region's main chapters, the Tea Party Patriots Southern New Jersey.

"We continue to oppose what we've always opposed, what we think's an unconstitutional government we have now," she said. "And we're in contact with more and more groups who share our values."

The Tea Party faithful appeared on the scene after the 2008 election and made themselves after the Boston Tea Party, when angry citizens protested taxation by an unrepresentative government. Today's Tea Party members have called for smaller government, lower taxes and the election of plain-spoken conservatives but not necessarily Republicans. In New Jersey, the LoBiondo race may not dominate the agenda in the same way as the pursuit of Menendez. The senator has now moved to appeal a state appellate court ruling allowing the tea party recall effort to proceed.

But LoBiondo, his right-wing critics say, has accommodated too much of President Barack Obama's agenda. Oshman points to his vote for cap-and-trade, Obama's emission-reduction program and his opposition to drilling for oil off New Jersey's coast.

When questioned about the primary challenge, Lomando said Wednesday that he felt many of his

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