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Mitt joins McCain today for fundraiser

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John McCain, the Republicans' pick for president, will get a little help at a Salt Lake fundraiser today from a former rival — Utah's "favorite son" candidate, Mitt Romney.

Romney, who dropped his own bid for the White House after a disappointing finish in last month's Super Tuesday elections, will be at the Arizona senator's private fundraiser being held in the Grand America Hotel downtown.

It will be the first time the two candidates have appeared together since Romney endorsed McCain on Feb. 14 and could provide an opportunity for the pair to discuss the vice presidency.

Romney has been mentioned as a potential running mate for McCain and told Fox News Channel's "Hannity & Colmes" earlier this month he would be "honored" to be chosen for the No. 2 spot on the ballot.

Kirk Jowers, a longtime Romney supporter and the head of the University of Utah's Hinckley Institute of Politics, said the joint appearance will help McCain win over Utahns still upset over seeing their preferred candidate knocked out of the running.

"Romney's attending this McCain event will have a huge impact on people healing from the primary contest and ultimately being able to accept McCain instead of Romney as the GOP nominee," Jowers said.

The latest Deseret Morning News/KSL-TV poll shows that Utahns are beginning to come around to McCain. Fifty-four percent said they would vote for McCain if the election were held now, nearly twice as many as in a poll taken last month.

Compare that to Romney, the former head of the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City and, like the majority of Utahns, a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, who won the state's GOP presidential primary on Feb. 5 with an unheard-of 90 percent of the vote.

More important to McCain's fund-raising efforts today, Romney collected more than \$6 million from Utahns compared to the \$177,000 the state's residents gave McCain. Seeing Romney side-by-side with McCain could significantly boost that total.

But that's a sight that likely will only be seen by Utahns willing to pay \$1,000 to attend today's lunch — or \$2,300, the maximum allowable campaign contribution, to also attend a reception with the Arizona senator — since the fund-raiser is closed to the press and the public.

McCain, who will be in Utah only about three hours today, hopes to raise \$375,000.

There is apparently concern Romney's popularity here could overshadow McCain, so it's not clear what role Romney will play at the event — even though it was McCain's campaign that sought out his support.

Plans are reportedly already under way for a future fundraiser for McCain in Utah that would prominently feature Romney. Romney may also accompany McCain to his next stop today, another fundraiser, this time in Colorado, a state won by Romney.

What is likely the first face-to-face meeting of Romney and McCain since the endorsement boosts

Romney's chances of becoming the Republican vice presidential nominee, Jowers said.

"This appearance with McCain certainly enhances his prospects and, perhaps more importantly, provides an opportunity for McCain and Romney to spend some quality time together," Jowers said.

There was no shortage of friction between McCain and Romney during the campaign, but Jowers said he believes Romney is one of a handful of top choices for vice president. McCain, though, is not expected to be in any hurry to make a decision.

The Republican National Convention, which is being held in Minneapolis, isn't until September. Democrats may not even have settled on a presidential candidate when they gather in Denver in August, given how close the race remains between New York Sen. Hillary Clinton and Illinois Sen. Barack Obama.

"McCain has the advantage of the latter convention, which gives him the opportunity to wait and see what ultimately happens with the Democratic ticket before making his final decision," Jowers said.

Romney isn't the only potential running mate for McCain, of course. Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. has also been mentioned as a possibility. Huntsman, whose father was a national finance chairman for Romney, surprised many Utahns by supporting McCain.

The governor stuck with McCain even when the Arizona senator's campaign was faltering last year because of serious financial difficulties and has campaigned for him in New Hampshire, Florida and other states.

Romney will be accompanied to the fundraiser by his son, Josh, who lives in Utah. Josh Romney had recently considered a run for Congress but ultimately decided not to launch a campaign.

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