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Corzine's new role in Senate has him dialing for dollars

By **DONNA DE LA CRUZ**

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON - It's money that helped get Jon Corzine into the Senate and it's money that will determine whether New Jersey's senior senator remains a rising star.

As chairman of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, it's up to Corzine to lead the charge in dialing for dollars in the hopes of stuffing the coffers of Democratic candidates to help them regain control of the Senate.

Corzine's money-making role has helped transform him from a very junior, first-term member of the minority party into one of the more visible Democrats in Washington, political analysts say.

That visibility can only help New Jersey, which has lost considerable political clout in recent years, with the departure of some veteran lawmakers such as Bill Bradley and Robert Torricelli. And four years into his freshman term, Corzine seems to have overcome the label of being that rich Wall Street guy who spent millions of his own money to get elected.

"My assumption was one of a Wall Street hotshot who's a ... zillionaire," said David Rebovich, a political science professor at Rider University. "But when you talk to him, he seems like a guy you went to high school or college with. Other people have a similar reaction - they don't see the money at all."

Corzine, 57, portrays himself as being like "anybody else," and scoffs at the thought that some people perceived him as some sort of tycoon with high-flying tastes just because he made millions as chairman of the Wall Street firm of Goldman Sachs & Co. He used \$60 million of his own money to run for the Senate in 2000.

"I love sports, I love to read," said Corzine during an interview in his

Senate office on Thursday. "I like a good movie and a dinner."

Corzine, with his soft-spoken voice and easy smile, comes across as a regular Joe, Rebovich said.

"He's very approachable and accessible," he said.

During a walk from his Senate office to the Capitol to vote on a bill Thursday, Corzine waves and says hello to various people. He's grabbed in a big bear hug by West Virginia Democratic Sen. John D. Rockefeller IV.

"This man has raised \$2 billion," Rockefeller says jokingly.

Corzine laughs and blushes slightly, which he does again when asked about his Wall Street success.

He explains it this way: "I think I had a decent business sense, and some skills."

His good friend and former pastor, the Rev. Doctor Charles T. Rush of Christ Church in Summit, N.J., said Corzine hasn't changed a bit from when they first met about 10 years ago.

"One of his friends once said that Jon Corzine proved that occasionally, good guys win, and that sums him up," Rush said.

"He never stopped thinking of himself as an ordinary kid from Illinois who happened to become very successful," Rush added.

Political analysts give Corzine high marks, especially for being able to shake that rich guy image.

"I think he's done a remarkable job in becoming regarded seriously as a senator. He had a lot to overcome. He was sort of seen as a wealthy dilettante and I think he's proven that he's certainly not that," said Ross Baker, a professor of political science at Rutgers University.

Corzine's life is very different now than his younger days in his native Willey's Station, a railroad stop of a town in south central Illinois, where his dad sold insurance and his mom was a public school teacher. After graduating from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1969, Corzine enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserves, where he remained until 1975, achieving the rank of sergeant in his infantry unit.

Corzine then began his career in finance, and in 1975, was hired as a bond trader at Goldman Sachs, and moved his family to New Jersey. Just five years later he was named a partner, and became chairman and chief

executive officer in 1994. He left the company in 1999 and began his campaign for the Senate.

Corzine's business sense was quickly tapped by the Democrats, and he has often been called on to react to President Bush's economic policies. In December 2002, he was named the campaign committee chairman.

Now Corzine spends three out of four weekends a month traveling around the country, trying to get people to part with significant amounts of cash to help Democrats take control of the Senate. It's a task made harder these days as he limps around due to a foot injury, and his right arm is bandaged due to a bout of bursitis.

The injuries don't prevent him from making fund-raising telephone calls, and Corzine brushes aside a question on whether he likes rattling a rather large tin cup.

"It's not a matter of whether you like it or you don't like it," Corzine said. "It's a matter of whether you feel the purpose seeking to raise the resources is worth the effort and in this particular case, there's nothing more worthwhile."

As of March 31, Corzine's committee has raised nearly \$34 million, according to the Federal Election Commission. The National Republican Senatorial Committee has raised \$39 million. Corzine hopes to raise \$80 million, and, believes the Democrats can take control of the Senate. Currently, Republicans hold a 51-to-49 majority.

Corzine believes the 14 incumbent Democratic senators up for re-election in November will win, and he believes Democratic candidates will prevail in Alaska, Colorado, Oklahoma and South Carolina. There are five Senate races in the South, and Corzine said if the Democrats could win three of those, they would be the majority party.

The Republicans aren't buying it.

"There's a lot of hype and rhetoric coming from them," said Dan Allen, spokesman for the Republican committee. "We feel very good about our chances to strengthen the majority and we're bolstered by our financial advantage over them."

But Jennifer Duffy, Senate editor for the non-partisan Washington-based Cook Political Report, said the Democrats do have a shot at taking the majority, with Corzine's fund-raising and recruitment of candidates playing a part.

"They'll be a lot more competitive than we thought they would be," Duffy

said.

And if Democrats do take the majority, look for Corzine to move up the leadership ladder.

"It will be huge if they pick up seats - he becomes a major player," said Nick Acocella, editor of Politifax, a weekly electronic newsletter.

Corzine says winning back the majority is not about him, it's about New Jersey.

"Issue after issue in New Jersey will be supported by a Democratic majority - that's the most important issue," he said.

He concedes that the committee chairmanship has historically been a stepping stone to bigger and better things.

"You're helping your colleagues - if you're successful in helping your colleagues, then I hope they will be helpful in letting me represent the people of New Jersey," he said.

In addition to his Democratic committee duties, Corzine is John Kerry's campaign chairman in New Jersey. If Kerry wins, Corzine's name has been tossed about as a possible choice for secretary of treasury. His name has also been mentioned as a possible gubernatorial candidate in 2005, should state Democrats decide not to go with incumbent James E. McGreevey.

Corzine says he wants to continue being a senator, although he did not rule out a run for governor in the future, but said he would not challenge McGreevey.

"I'd like to build a very successful Senate career and help the people of New Jersey and leave a real impact on the nation."

Corzine tries to get back to New Jersey when he can, and planned to be in the Garden State over the weekend. The waiting area of his Senate office is an homage to New Jersey, with his walls adorned not of pictures of him, but with black and white photos of native New Jerseyans such as Susan Sarandon, Thomas Edison, Paul Robeson and and Frank Sinatra.

As for the candy of choice offered to guests, New Jersey again plays a role. Only M&M's are offered.

"They're from Mars (Inc.)," Corzine said of the Hackettstown, N.J.-based candymaker. "It's just one of our ways to try and promote New Jersey."

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