

Obama Faces Tough Questions At Iowa Forum

BY PETER NICHOLAS
Tribune Washington Bureau (MCT)

DES MOINES, Iowa — Neighborhood residents invited to a small backyard conversation with President Barack Obama on Wednesday told him they were deeply worried about the economy and uneasy about his tax, war and health care policies.

The event carried echoes of Obama's televised town hall session last week, in which one of the participants, Velma Hart, said she was tired of defending him and disappointed that more hasn't been done to help middle-class families.

Returning to the state that launched him on a winning path toward the Democratic nomination, Obama spoke to an audience that had clear misgivings about some of his policies.

The first question came from Mary Stier, mother of a 24-year-old college graduate who is still trying to find full-time work. While Stier said her son had "campaigns fiercely for you and was very inspired by your message of hope," he and his friends

are now "struggling" and "losing their hope," she said.

Obama has been taking part in such forums for two main reasons: to show empathy for Americans struggling amid a tough economy and to make the case for Democrats in advance of the midterm elections.

Aides said Obama enjoys meeting with small groups of people outside Washington as a way to escape the insularity of the White House. While audiences have been respectful and polite, they've used the rare encounter with a sitting president to make known their displeasure with current conditions.

Obama spoke to a small group of residents in Albuquerque, N.M., on Tuesday and he was to appear at a similar forum in Richmond, Va., later on Wednesday.

Obama, not wearing a jacket or tie, his sleeves rolled up, gave a broad defense of his policies while denouncing proposals coming from Republicans.

"When you look at the choice we face in this election coming up, the other side, what it's really offering, is the same policies that from 2001 to 2009 put off hard

problems and didn't really speak honestly to the American people about how we're going to get this country on track over the long term," he said.

In reply to Stier, a former publisher of the *Des Moines Register* newspaper, Obama said he was impressed with her son's generation. He talked about the severity of the recession and segued into a discussion of what he had done to ensure that young people "get the best education possible."

"The economy is growing; it's just not growing as fast as we'd like — partly because there are still some headwinds," he said.

A businessman questioned Obama's plan to let the Bush-era tax cuts expire for Americans earning more than \$250,000 a year. The man said taxation and increased government involvement in the economy is "strangling job creation vehicles that are available."

Obama was unmoved. He said he has repeatedly cut taxes for small business.

"So your taxes haven't gone up in this administration," the president said. "Your taxes have gone down in this administration. I want

to be clear about this. The notion that, 'He's a Democrat, so your taxes must have gone up' — that's just not true."

Obama also defended his view that the country can't afford the \$700 billion it would cost to preserve the Bush tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans. At a time when Americans are worried about rising deficits, he would be hard-pressed to cut enough spending to offset the \$700 billion price tag, he said.

"People say, 'Well, why don't you eliminate all those ... pork projects that members of Congress are getting out there?'" he said. "Now, I actually think that a lot of that stuff needs to end, but even if I eliminated every single ... pork project by members of Congress, that's 1 percent of the budget. So finding \$700 billion is not easy."

Pointed though the questions were, Obama had reason for hope.

Asked about the event afterward, Stier said her son remained an Obama supporter.

Of the president's performance Wednesday, she added that he "continues to inspire."

Iowa Medical-Marijuana Issue Stalemated

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — The issue of medical marijuana remains undecided in Iowa after the state's pharmacy board rejected a request to write rules allowing the drug to be used for health purposes.

The Iowa Pharmacy Board on Tuesday unanimously rejected the request from a marijuana activist to write the rules.

The *Des Moines Register* reports that in February the board recommended that state legislators reclassify marijuana to allow the drug to be used medically. Lawmakers said they would consider it but then said the Iowa Code gave the pharmacy board authority to establish medical marijuana guidelines.

"We are an appointed body, we are not elected officials, and I do not believe we should be writing law," board member Margaret Whitworth of Cedar Rapids said.

However, lawmakers likely won't fulfill that request during the legislative session next year, said Democratic House majority leader Rep. Kevin McCarthy of Des Moines. He said issues such

as the economy and state budget are more pressing.

Medical marijuana advocate Carl Olsen of Des Moines said he would continue to pursue the issue in Iowa. Olsen said he could appeal in court, where he could ask a judge to order board action.

Board chairman Vernon Benjamin, a Fort Madison pharmacist, said medical marijuana rules would need to be carefully constructed. He argues the pharmacy board is too narrow a group to decide the issue.

Board members said while supporters of medical marijuana have been most vocal, they have received e-mails and letters from marijuana opponents. Some opponents wore "No Medical Marijuana" buttons at Tuesday's meeting.

Jennifer Husmann, project coordinator for the group Jones County for Safe and Healthy Youth, said few marijuana opponents spoke up at public hearings.

"They didn't think it would really go this far," she said.

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