Obama launches 3 days of fundraising travel

BEN FELLER - AP White House Correspondent - Associated Press

MENOMONEE FALLS, Wis. (AP) — President Barack Obama, embarking on a three-day tour to raise money for Democrats, said Monday that a rising homegrown clean energy industry can help reverse years of manufacturing job losses overseas and help heal a still-ailing economy.

"We can't turn back, we've got keep going forward," Obama told a group of workers at the ZBB Energy Corp, underscoring what he said was his lasting commitment to a clean energy future.

The company near Milwaukee makes advanced batteries and "intelligent" power systems that use renewable sources of energy. The company is expanding with the help of a $1.3 million federal stimulus loan.

"For years, we've heard about manufacturing jobs disappearing overseas. Companies like this one are showing us how manufacturing jobs can come back," Obama said.

Later, he headed to nearby Milwaukee to raise money for gubernatorial candidate Tom Barrett, Milwaukee's Democratic mayor, and other Wisconsin Democrats. Barrett was an early supporter of Obama's once long-shot White House bid. He will cap his day at a glitzy fundraiser in Los Angeles for congressional Democratic candidates.

Obama depicted the economy as still weak, with joblessness stubbornly high, especially in the industrial Midwest.

But he said one of the engines of future job growth is "jumpstarting a homegrown, clean energy industry."

"We expect our commitment to clean energy to lead to more than 800,000 jobs by 2012," Obama said. "Thanks for helping to build the future," he told the factory workers.

The company said it was putting its stimulus money toward a factory renovation expected to triple its manufacturing capacity. The company said it could keep nearly a dozen workers on the job as a result of the grant and hopes to hire about 80 new workers over time.

"ZBB is also planning to take advantage of a special tax credit to build another factory in Southeastern Wisconsin to create more jobs. They are confident they can expand because they are seeing rising demand for advanced batteries," Obama said.

The batteries are designed to store electricity from solar cells and wind turbines. "And you've been able to export batteries around the globe, helping us to lead in this new industry," Obama said.

With Congress gone and much of Washington in vacation mode, Obama is squeezing in a largely political trip that foreshadows how he will campaign in the fall — aggressively, in places where is he wanted. Over three days, he will be raising dollars for Democrats in five states, from the Midwest to the West, Northwest to Northeast, South and back home.

By pairing official events like the stop at the battery factory with political ones, like the fundraisers in Milwaukee and Los Angeles, the White House can bill taxpayers for most of the cost of the trip.

Obama is touting his commitment to policies — supported mostly by Democrats in Congress — to turn around a lumbering economy by investing long-term in clean and energy-efficient technologies.

As leader of the Democratic Party, Obama has a political job description that demands he help elect lawmakers and governors who support his agenda. And that often means showing up to support their campaigns.

"The president takes that role seriously," White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said. "And we obviously are getting closer and closer to some very important elections."

In November, all 435 House seats, one-third of the Senate, and a majority of governor's and legislative jobs will be on the ballot. Democrats now control the House and Senate, but the ailing economy has turned voters against incumbents.

All together, Obama will visit Wisconsin, California, Washington, Ohio and Florida before returning to the nation's capital Wednesday night. Each stop involves tight races in states that could be vital to Obama himself in 2012.

Pursuing Obama as he traveled around the nation was the controversy over his remarks about building a mosque near the site of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York City.

Deputy White House press secretary Bill Burton told reporters aboard Air Force One it was "not politics" but Obama's feeling that he had the obligation as president to "make sure people are treated equally" under the Constitution.

Obama has said that religious freedom allows the mosque to be built, but without commenting on the wisdom of building one two blocks from ground zero. Republicans have pounded him for his comments, making it a prime midterm election issue.

"I can't speak to the politics of what the Republicans are doing," Burton said. But he said Obama "felt it was his obligation as president to address this." Obama was on

the way to Wisconsin for fundraising.

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