

Biden: Manufacturing Is Essential To Middle Class

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DURHAM, N.C. (AP) — Manufacturing jobs are essential to support a vibrant middle class and the Obama Administration is working to boost U.S. manufacturing of growing technologies, Vice President Joe Biden said Thursday.

"We're going to make sure that we don't just build the same old economy on top of the one that just collapsed," Biden said during a visit with Energy Secretary Steven Chu to Cree Inc., a maker of light-emitting diodes.

"Instead, we are remaking what we do, what we make, what we build and design, what we produce and where we produce it," Biden said. "All with an eye on bringing the middle class back to the place where we used to be able to be. That you could have a good job, a decent job. We want to create whole new industries."

The visit came the same day President Barack Obama signed into law a \$38 billion package of tax breaks and spending designed to give U.S. companies added incentive to expand hiring.

Cree has transitioned in recent years from making light-emitting diodes for mobile phones and automobile dashboards toward commercial lighting units. It is expanding rapidly with demand for its energy-efficient products, has hired about 375 workers since last summer, and still has dozens of remaining vacancies.

Cree is spending \$150 million out of the \$430 million of new stock it sold investors in September to expand production. It's doubling its manufacturing in China for Asian markets, where Chu said the majority of the world's LED fixtures are manufactured.

The company also is speeding up expansion at its U.S. manufacturing hub here with \$39 million in clean-manufacturing tax credits from last year's \$787 stimulus package. Dozens of companies in 43 states have received the credits. Biden said they included a General Electric plant in Kentucky that makes high-efficiency dishwashers and an Indiana company producing precision gearboxes for wind turbines.

Republicans said Thursday the stimulus package has failed to turn around the slumping economy. With the national unemployment rate near 10 percent "it is hard to consider this legislation successful," the Republican National Committee said.

Biden said the U.S. is competing against companies around the world that have taken leadership positions in manufacturing products with growth potential, from high-speed trains in Spain to fuel-efficient cars in Japan.

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Testing department supervisor Regi Smith said he was unemployed for nearly a year during the last recession before landing a job at Cree eight years ago. He said knowing the company was manufacturing a product likely to grow in demand gave him confidence about his financial future.

"I have a job that will truly take care of me and take care of my family," said Smith, 49, of Durham.

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