

Obama Visits Hard-Hit Wis. Manufacturing City

Scott Bauer, Associated Press Writer

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — If President Barack Obama wants to see a community hard hit by the recession, there's not many places better in Wisconsin than where he's coming Wednesday.

Obama invited the public to attend a round table discussion on the economy in Racine, a city suffering under 14.2 percent unemployment, second highest in the state and nearly double its jobless rate two years ago.

The city on Lake Michigan about 30 miles south of Milwaukee is struggling with a loss of manufacturing jobs. Chrysler is closing its engine plant in nearby Kenosha and General Motors last year shut down its plant in Janesville, about an hour to the west.

Manufacturing jobs have been leaving the city for 20 years, but Racine Mayor John Dickert said the trend is on the rebound. The mayor, who calls himself a conservative Democrat, said Obama's visit gives the city a chance to show how it's redeveloping the inner city and putting federal stimulus money to use.

"We've taken every dollar he's given us and multiplied it by three to five times," Dickert said.

But Wisconsin Republican Party Chairman Reince Priebus said it was a "dangerous move" for the president to come to Wisconsin, given that the state has lost tens of thousands of jobs since the stimulus passed.

"I think he's going to be met with despair and disgust when he's in Racine," Priebus said. "It just personified failure when he comes to that area. ... This is sort of like being witness to a bad accident."

It will mark Obama's third visit to Wisconsin since he was elected president. He came to Green Bay to talk health care in 2009, and was in Madison last November to talk about education.

Members of the local tea party group plan to protest outside Wednesday's meeting, and some hope to attend and ask questions. Nancy Milholland, 47, an unemployed sales manager and organizer of the Racine County Tea Party, said the visit gives her group a chance to let Obama know that he's spending too much time on issues like health care and Wall Street reform instead of fixing the economy.

"We feel ignored," she said. "This administration is on the wrong side of the voters and it's like they're not listening."

Obama's visit also could be complicated by calls for him to intervene in the U.S.

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Export-Import Bank's recent decision to deny Bucyrus International Inc., based just north of Racine, massive loan guarantees to provide equipment for a power plant project in India.

The company's chief executive, along with the governor and other local leaders, hope Obama discusses the issue Wednesday. Losing the \$600 million deal could cost Bucyrus and its manufacturers 1,000 jobs in Wisconsin and 13 other states, including about 300 locally, CEO Tim Sullivan said Tuesday.

Republican candidate for governor Scott Walker took advantage of the president's visit by taking out a full-page ad in the Racine Journal Times for Wednesday calling on him to intervene in the Bucyrus deal to save the jobs.

The Democratic candidate for governor, Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett, said he wanted to talk with Obama on Wednesday about the Bucyrus issue.

Obama carried Racine County with 53 percent of the vote during the 2008 election, a shift for the county of roughly 200,000 people that voted 52 percent for President George W. Bush in 2004.

Since Obama's victory, unemployment in the county has nearly doubled to 9.4 percent, above the statewide average for May of 8.2 percent. In the city of Racine, home to about 82,000 people, unemployment is even worse — 14.2 percent this May compared with 7.8 percent just two years ago.

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