

Obama sharpens jobs element of energy pitch

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President Barack Obama speaks at Rec Hall on the Penn State University campus, Thursday, Feb. 3, 2011, in State College, Pa. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

President Barack Obama, turning briefly to his eclipsed domestic agenda Thursday, called on the nation's businesses to make fresh investments in clean energy technology that lay a foundation for long-term American prosperity.

He proposed a new tax credit and other measures to encourage businesses to retrofit their plants and reduce costs - steps that he said would save \$40 billion a year in utility bills. The visit to the Penn State campus was designed to highlight Obama's emphasis on energy and his view that technological innovations represent jobs of the future.

"Making our buildings more energy efficient is one of the fastest, easiest

and cheapest ways to save money, combat pollution and create jobs," the president said, taking his retooled economic pitch to the heart of Pennsylvania, a prominent state in presidential politics that will be a key in his 2012 re-election bid.

Obama has wanted to feature his long-term economic plans ever since he detailed them in his State of the Union speech to a joint session of Congress last week. The State College trip was the third in a series of visits to energy-related enterprises in as many weeks.

But the trip comes as the crisis in Egypt has dominated his time and consumed media attention. Obama is trying to press on with his economic ideas, ahead of the release of his budget plan on Feb. 14, while he manages his response to the violent clashes that have Egypt and the Mideast on the edge.

"In America innovation isn't just how we change our lives, it's how we make a living," Obama said, pushing a key feature of an economic agenda that blends his goals of greater energy independence with a long-term job growth strategy.

Speaking directly to a youthful audience, Obama said: "The greatest force that the world has ever known and that is the American idea. If you remember that and keep breaking new ground, if we as a country keep investing in you, I'm absolutely confident that America will win the future in this century just like we did in the last."

As part of his new plan, Obama will ask Congress to provide companies with a tax credit that financially rewards them for retrofitting their buildings in ways that decrease energy usage. The proposal would alter the existing tax break for such commercial upgrades, switching it from a deduction to a credit that applies more widely, administration officials said.

The energy efficiency plan is an extension of Obama's call last year to give government rebates for home retrofitting, a proposal that has stalled in the Senate.

The White House said former President Clinton and General Electric CEO Jeff Immelt will lead the effort to reach out to businesses to take advantage of the government efficiency incentives. Obama recently named Immelt to head an advisory council on entrepreneurship.

Before making his remarks in Penn State's Rec Hall, Obama received a tutorial on energy research designed to improve indoor air quality and another on high performance wall systems, donning safety goggles for one experiment. "My fifth grade science experiment looked just like this," Obama joked to reporters at one point.

During his comments, Obama twice mentioned Joe Paterno, the locally beloved coach of the Penn State football, who was in the audience.

Rob Gleason, chairman of Pennsylvania's Republican party, said Obama's visit is a sign that the 2012 campaign is in full swing.

In a Thursday morning conference call, Gleason questioned whether Obama's energy policy could be trusted and criticized what he called the administration's "runaway spending" and hostile position toward industry.

The president is also calling for:

- Broader access to financing for businesses that want to make energy-saving upgrades, and loan guarantees for hospitals, schools and companies to do the same.
- Competitive grants for states and local governments that make it easier

for companies to upgrade their buildings.

- More training for workers in the field of commercial building technology.

The White House said it is targeting the commercial sector because its buildings consume roughly 20 percent of all energy in the U.S. economy. Administration officials offered no details on how much Obama's plan would cost. They said those details will be released in the budget and the proposed elimination of oil industry subsidies would help cover the costs.

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