

Obama takes on 'tweeters' in Twitter town hall

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President Barack Obama, accompanied by Twitter co-founder and Executive Chairman Jack Dorsey, left, points to a question on the screen posted by House Speaker of the House John Boehner of Ohio, during the first ever Twitter Town Hall, Wednesday, July 6, 2011, in the East Room of the White House in Washington. (AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais)

(AP) -- President Barack Obama kicked off his first Twitter town hall with - what else? - a tweet.

Using a laptop set up on a lectern in the East Room of the White House, Obama typed this message: "In order to reduce the deficit, what costs would you cut and what investments would you keep?"

The tweet set the tone for the town hall focused on jobs and the economy, and hosted by Twitter, the social media service. The White House sees social media as an opportunity for the president to interact with Americans directly, particularly the younger and more tech-savvy

part of the electorate, as his re-election campaign ramps up.

Twitter selected the questions for the president from among the thousands of inquiries submitted from people across the country, including Republican House Speaker John Boehner, who asked Obama, "Where are the jobs?"

"This is a slightly skewed question," Obama said of his political rival's inquiry.

The president went on to answer Boehner's question by noting that the economy is, in fact, creating jobs, though not at a pace anyone should be satisfied with. He said there was more the government could do to boost the economy but also said he hasn't always been able to get Republican support for doing so.

Obama also used the town hall as an opportunity to deliver a remarkably critical line about Republicans who are fighting with him over raising the nation's borrowing limit. Obama said GOP lawmakers should not use their votes on that matter as "a gun against the heads of the American people" to retain the tax breaks they want for corporate jet owners and oil companies.

Twitter users had to keep their questions to the social networking site's 140-character limit. But the president had no such restrictions. He answered in his trademark, lengthy form to questions on college costs, immigration, collective bargaining rights, the debt limit, manufacturing jobs, the housing crisis and other topics as Twitter users sent queries in by the tens of thousands.

Twitter was boiling his answers down to 140 characters or less at <http://askobama.twitter.com> . The White House was doing the same through its official Twitter account, (@)WhiteHouse.

The president took 18 questions from the Twitterverse before town hall moderator and Twitter co-founder Jack Dorsey turned the conversation around and read the president an array of people's responses to the live tweet from Obama that started the event.

Tweeters responded en masse with ideas for how to reduce the nation's deficit: cut defense contracting, trim the war on drugs, stop giving money to Pakistan, raise taxes, cut oil subsidies.

Obama found lots to agree with, but he also had lots of explanatory caveats. On cutting defense spending, he cautioned: "We have to do all of this in a fairly gradual way." On reducing foreign aid, he said lots of people have exaggerated ideas about what the U.S. spends overseas.

The first question asked of Obama concerned what mistakes he'd made in handling the recession and what he'd do differently.

Obama defended his stimulus program as "the right thing to do." But he allowed that his administration had underestimated the severity of the recession, and so he did not prepare the American people "for how long this was going to take" and the tough choices that lay ahead. Obama also said the problems in the housing market were more stubborn than expected and he'd had to revamp his assistance programs several times.

Leaving the economy briefly, Dorsey, the event moderator, said Obama received several questions on his decision to eliminate the space shuttle program. With NASA's final launch set for Friday, Obama defended his decision, saying it's time for the U.S. to look toward the future.

"We're still using the same models for space travel that we used for the Apollo program 30 or 40 years ago," he said. "Rather than keep on doing the same thing, let's invest in basic research around new technology that can get us places faster, allow human space flight to last longer."

A handful of journalists from newspapers around the country were asked by Twitter to join the event as "curators," a role that entails trying to generate questions on the economy from Twitter users and helping the company to identify trends in the inquiries.

The town hall also marked the first White House "Tweetup" - that's an in-person gathering of people who are connected through Twitter.

The White House invited about 30 people who follow the administration's official Twitter account, (@)WhiteHouse, to come to Washington to take part in Wednesday's event. The invitees were also meeting with senior administration officials following the town hall to share their thoughts on issues important to them.

Obama has taken questions from the public via social media, including Twitter, before. In April, he took part in a town hall hosted by Facebook.

More information: <http://askobama.twitter.com/>

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