

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks on Economic Stabilization and a Question-and-Answer Session in Fort Myers, Florida

February 10, 2009

The President. All right, everybody. Thank you so much. Please have a seat. It is good to be in Florida, especially in February. [*Laughter*]

I want to acknowledge a number of people who are here who are just great friends and outstanding public servants. We've got Florida Chief Financial Officer Alex Sink; give Alex a big round of applause. We have your own mayor, Jim Humphrey. Thank you, Mayor; Representative Alan Grayson; Representative Allen Boyd; Representative Corrine Brown; Representative Kathy Castor; Representative Kendrick Meek; Representative Ron Klein; Representative Suzanne Kosmas; Representative Debbie Wasserman Schultz; and Representative Robert Wexler. It's as fine a set of Congress people as you can imagine. Florida, you're lucky.

I want to give a special thanks to your Governor, Charlie Crist, for joining us here today. The thing about Governors is they understand our economic crisis in a way that maybe sometimes folks a little more removed don't understand. They're on the frontlines dealing with the economy every single day; they're having to make choices about the budget every single day. They know what it means to balance a budget when revenues are short and more and more people are asking for help. And Governor Crist shares my conviction that creating jobs and turning this economy around is a mission that transcends party. And when the town is burning, you don't check party labels; everybody needs to grab a hose. And that's what Charlie Crist is doing right here today.

Governor Crist and Governors across the country understand that. Mayors, like Mayor Humphrey, understands that. And I think that you understand it, too, which is what I want to talk about today.

Last night I addressed the Nation to explain why I believe we need to put the economic recovery plan that is before Congress in motion as soon as possible. But during the day, I had spent some time in Indiana talking to folks, in Elkhart. In Elkhart the unemployment rate went from 4.7 percent last year to 15.3 percent this year; one year, and the unemployment rate tripled.

Today I wanted to come to Florida, and I wanted to visit all of you in Fort Myers because you have seen hardship as well. You've seen a change in the economic conditions of your community. You see, all too often in Washington what happens is, is that people think in terms of numbers and statistics. They think about it in abstract terms. But when we say we've lost 3.6 million jobs since this recession began, nearly 600,000 in the past month alone; when we say that Lee County has seen its unemployment rate go from 3.5 percent to nearly 10 percent in less than 2 years; when we talk about the plummeting home prices and soaring foreclosure rates that have plagued this area; and the layoffs at companies like Kraft Construction and Chico's, companies that have sustained this community for years, we're not just talking about faceless numbers. We're talking about families. We're talking about some of the people in this town hall meeting today, your neighbors, your friends.

We're talking about people like Steve Adkins, who joined us today with his wife, Michelle, and their son, Bailey, and daughter, Josie. Steve is the president of a small construction company in Fort Myers that specializes in building and repairing schools. But work has slowed considerably, like it has across the board in the construction area. Now, he's done what he can to reduce overhead costs, but he still has been forced to lay off half his workforce, which means that many of those people may now be trying to figure out how are they going to pay their mortgage, how are they going to pay for the basic necessities of life, which puts us on a downward economic spiral.

Steve and Michelle have made sacrifices of their own: they've sold their home and moved into a smaller one. And that's what this debate is about: folks in Fort Myers and all across the country who have lost their livelihoods and don't know what will take its place; parents who've lost their health care and lie awake at night praying their kids don't get sick; families who've lost the home that was the foundation of their American Dream; young people who put that college acceptance letter back in the envelope because they can't afford it.

That's what's behind the numbers; that's what's behind the statistics. That's the true measure of this economic crisis. Those are the stories I heard every time I came to Florida, because this isn't new. When we were campaigning down here before the election, I was hearing about Florida suffering the first recession that it had had in 16 years. We didn't know then how deep it was going to go. Well, it's gone deep; it's gotten worse. And the stories that I've heard here in Florida, and in Indiana, and all across the country, I carried with me to the White House.

I promised you back then that if elected President, I would do everything I could to help our communities recover, that I would not forget. And that's why I've come back here today, to tell you how I intend to keep that promise to make communities like Fort Myers stronger.

So the situation we face could not be more serious. I don't have to tell you that. We've inherited an economic crisis as deep and as dire as any since the Great Depression. And economists across the spectrum have warned, if we don't act immediately, then millions more jobs will disappear, the national unemployment rates will approach double digits, more people will lose their homes and their health care, and our Nation will sink into a crisis that at some point is going to be that much tougher to reverse. So we cannot afford to wait. We can't wait and see and hope for the best. I believe in hope, but I also believe in action.

We can't afford to posture and bicker and resort to the same failed ideas that got us into this mess in the first place. That's what the election was about. You rejected many of those ideas because you know they didn't work. You didn't send us to Washington because you were hoping for more of the same. You sent us there to change things. And that's exactly what I intend to do as President of the United States.

The problems that led us into this crisis are deep, they're widespread, and so we're going to have to do a lot of different things to get the economy moving again. We need to stabilize and repair our financial system. We need to get credit flowing again to families and businesses. We need to stem the spread of foreclosures that are sweeping this country.

My Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner outlined a plan to address these challenges just this morning. We know that in order to address our economic crisis, we're going to have to help homeowners, not just banks, but homeowners as well. Fort Myers had the highest foreclosure rate in the nation last year. Entire neighborhoods are studded with foreclosure signs. Families across this city feel like they're losing their foothold on the American Dream, so—because

when one person loses their home to foreclosure, that doesn't just affect that family; property values across the board start declining.

So we're going to do everything we can to help responsible homeowners here in Fort Myers and other hard-hit communities stay in their homes. If we want to truly turn this around, we've got to remember that the stronger our communities are, then the stronger the financial system would be. And change can't just happen from the top down, it's going to have to start from the bottom up.

Now, in addition to the housing situation, what we have to do is put people back to work. Last week, we saw a thousand men and women stand in line for just 35 Miami firefighter jobs; 35 jobs, a thousand people standing in line. It's a story repeated across the country. There's so much demand for jobs that just aren't there.

And that's both the paradox and the promise of this moment. At a time when so many Americans are looking for work, there's so much work that America needs done. That's why we put forward this plan for recovery and reinvestment. It's the simple idea at its core that we put people back to work doing the work that America needs done. It's a plan that will save or create up to 4 million jobs over the next 2 years. It will ignite spending by businesses and consumers alike. It will make the investments necessary for lasting economic growth and prosperity.

Now, we'll begin by ensuring that Americans who have lost their jobs through no fault of their own can receive greater unemployment benefits and continue their health care coverage. That means an additional \$100 per month to more than 760,000 Florida workers who've lost their jobs in this recession. It means extended unemployment benefits for another 170,000 folks who've been laid off and are looking for work but can't find any right now.

That's not just a moral responsibility, to help, give a lending hand to our fellow Americans in times of emergency, it makes good economic sense, because if you don't have money, you can't spend it. And if you don't spend it, that means businesses don't have customers. Our economy will continue to decline.

For that same reason, this recovery plan includes \$1,000 of badly needed tax relief for middle class workers and families, putting money back in the pockets of nearly 6.9 million workers and their families here in Florida. And we will provide a partially refundable \$2,500 per-student tax credit to help 195,000 Florida families send their kids to college, relieving your household budget. That provides household budgets relief right now, but it also rewards America in the long run with a highly skilled workforce.

And most importantly, this plan will put people to work right now by making direct investments in areas like health care and energy and education and infrastructure, investments that save jobs, and create new jobs and new businesses, and help our economy grow again.

Now, more than 90 percent of the jobs created by this plan will be in the private sector—90 percent. And they won't be make-work jobs; they'll be jobs that lay the groundwork for a lasting economic boom, jobs that put people to work today preparing America for tomorrow.

Jobs building wind turbines and solar panels and fuel efficient cars, doubling our investment in clean energy, helping end our dependence on foreign oil. Jobs upgrading our schools. Jobs creating 21st century classrooms and libraries and laboratories for millions of children across America. Jobs computerizing our health care system, which saves billions of dollars and countless lives. Jobs constructing broadband Internet lines that reach Florida's rural schools and small businesses, so they can connect and compete with their counterparts

anywhere in the world. Jobs rebuilding our roads and our bridges and repairing our dangerously deficient dams and levees so we don't face another Katrina. And the jobs that Charlie Crist has to worry about, the jobs of firefighters and teachers and nurses and police officers that would otherwise be eliminated if we don't provide States some basic relief.

Now, of course, there are some critics—always critics—who say we can't afford to take on these priorities. But we have postponed and neglected them for too long. And because we have, our health care still costs too much. Our schools still fail too many of our children. Our dependence on foreign oil has actually grown since the 1970s, still threatens our economy and our security. We've seen the tragic consequences when our bridges crumble and our levees fail. They say we can't afford to take on these tasks. Florida, you know we cannot afford not to.

Now, I'm not going to tell you that this plan is perfect. I mean, it was produced in Washington. [*Laughter*] No plan is perfect. I also can't tell you with 100 percent certainty that everything in this plan will work exactly as we hope. But I can tell you with complete confidence that a failure to act in the face of this crisis will only worsen our problems. Doing nothing is not an option. You didn't send me to Washington to do nothing.

So we've had a good debate, we've had a good debate. That's part of what democracy is all about. But the time for talk is over. Folks here in Fort Myers and across America, they need help, they need action, and they need it now. Americans I've met understand that even with this plan our economy will likely be measured in years, not weeks or months.

Audience member. You got eight. [*Laughter*]

The President. For our TV audience, somebody said I had eight, which we're not clear about yet. Look, here's—you know, the American people—all of you—[*laughter*—you've got common sense, you understand it took us a long time to get into this fix. We're not going to get out of it overnight. But what you don't have patience for is just listening to a bunch of bickering in Washington and nothing getting done.

And I know that there are a lot of folks here in Fort Myers and across Florida that are struggling. But I also know, because I spent a lot of time in this State, that you got some of the best workers in the world here. You've got some of the best neighbors in the world who step up, who help each other, who make sacrifices when times are tough. I know that all that people are asking for is a chance to work hard. They're not looking for a handout. They just want to be able to work hard and translate that hard work into a good life for themselves and their families. So you're doing your part down here. It's time that Washington did its part too.

This is a responsibility that we did not ask for, but it is a responsibility we will accept for the sake of our future and our children's. And being here in Fort Myers with all of you, I am more confident than ever that we can set aside our differences; that if we commit ourselves to the work ahead and come together, then I guarantee you we can meet the great test of our times.

So thank you very much for your attention. Thanks for your attendance. And now we're going to start opening this thing up for some questions. Thank you, Fort Myers. Thank you.

Testing, one, two, three. All right, everybody have a seat. Now, here's how we're going to work this. There are folks in the audience who have microphones. Raise your microphones, guys. They will be going around, and I will be just calling on folks as they raise their hands. If you could introduce yourself when you ask—before you ask your question or make your comment. Because we've got a lot of people here and we've got a limited amount of time, try to

keep your question relatively brief, and I'll try to keep my answer relatively brief. And I think I'll go girl-boy-girl-boy—[laughter]—so that I avoid any trouble. All right. And stand up when you ask your question as well, so we can all see you. All right.

So let's see, there's a young lady right there. Yes, right there.

Education

Q. Hi. My name is Jyoti Naik. I work for Edison State College. And I was wondering how much stress you're putting in your economic stimulus plan for higher education, because vocational training helps lower unemployment.

The President. Well, it's a great question. And we put a huge emphasis on education generally and higher education in particular.

Now, I already mentioned one provision that's in there, which is to provide a tax credit to help young people go to college and afford it. Now, that is not only helpful for the young person, it's also obviously helpful to household budgets, which means that there will be money that those households can spend on other things. And people will be accumulating less debt.

We're also—when we talk about money for school construction in the plan, we are not just talking about elementary schools or high schools, we're also talking about community colleges and public universities. There's a lot of unmet—undone work that needs to be done. And for us to be able to fund some of that work will not only improve, let's say, the science lab in a particular school or a vocational training facility, but it also will upgrade over time the skills of the workforce here in Fort Myers and in the surrounding community.

So we are going to be putting a lot of emphasis on job training, on school construction, and on financing of higher education. I think that's the highest priority. It's an example of how we can use a crisis and turn it into an opportunity. Because if we use this moment to address some things that we probably should have been doing over the last 10, 15, 20 years, then when we emerge from the crisis, the economy is going to be that much stronger.

If people who've been laid off of work are able to get a tax credit or a voucher to retrain so that now they have upgraded their skills, then they're going to be that much stronger when it comes to finding a job in the future. They'll boost their earnings, boost productivity in the community.

So, I think it's very important for us to think both short term, as well as long term. And that's going to be one of my highest priorities as President. Okay?

All right. Gentleman in the tie, right behind you.

Home Mortgage Industry

Q. Welcome to Fort Myers, Mr. President.

The President. Thank you, sir.

Q. My name is Adam Palmer. So, many of the lenders these days are unwilling to discuss any possibility of doing a loan modification program unless you're currently in default. Subsequently, this is penalizing responsible Americans who have lost all the equity in their property. What can be done to change that?

The President. Well, you're making a really important point. My Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner announced much of our financial restructuring plan. He's going to increase oversight,

transparency. Some of you may have heard we're going to condition any taxpayer assistance to banks on them doing something serious about executive compensation. No more enormous bonuses for companies that taxpayers are helping out. But what he also pointed out is that we've got to provide some direct relief to homeowners.

Now, we didn't want the story about what we're doing with homeowners to be buried in this larger story today about how we're dealing with the financial system. So I'm going to be personally making an announcement in the next couple of weeks about what our overall housing strategy is going to be. But I think you identified the key issue, which is, look, if we're honest, there are probably some folks who bought homes that they couldn't afford. And no matter how much we help, they're not going to be able to make their mortgage payments. But the larger group of folks are folks who have made their mortgage payments, but because of foreclosures, property values have declined, they're now what's called "underwater," where the mortgage is worth more than the price of the home, the current value of the home.

And people may have been—people may be getting squeezed on their job, their incomes are lowering. And they're still doing what they're supposed to do, they're still making these payments every day, but it's getting harder and harder and harder.

So the question is, can we work to design a system where the banks recognize it's in their interest to avoid foreclosure? Because the bank is only going to get 40 cents on the dollar if there's a foreclosure. On the other hand, the borrower is going to have to probably, if they get some assistance, agree to give up some equity once housing prices recover, so that both sides are giving a little bit, but you avert the foreclosure. That's good not only for the homeowner, but it's good for the entire community, and it's good for property values throughout the State.

Now, there are a couple of wrinkles in order for us to accomplish this. For example, unfortunately, it used to be that when you took out a mortgage you went to the local bank, they gave you the loan, and they kept the mortgage right there in the bank. As I think a lot of people know, these days what happened was they took these mortgages, they wrapped them up in a big bundle, they sold slices of them on the stock market. And so you don't have any one person who actually owns the mortgage, which makes negotiations on a lot of this stuff very difficult.

Part of what we may have to do is to make some changes in the law that make it easier for the servicers, the people who take your check every day and are managing these portfolio of mortgages on behalf of a bunch of people who own bits and pieces of the mortgage, to make it easier for them to engage in these negotiations in an efficient way. And those are some of the issues that we'll be laying out over the next couple weeks.

But this is absolutely vital. No place is seeing tougher times because of the mortgage crisis than the people here in Florida and the people here in Fort Myers. And unless we address this in a serious way, we are not going to be able to get the economy back to where it needs to be. All right?

All right, let's see, this side of the room. Young lady right here who's standing right up front. She's waving at me—[*laughter*]. Right over there. Are we getting her? Well, I was actually pointing at her right there in the blue, but now I feel bad, you were—I'll call on you, I promise. [*Laughter*] I promise you. You just, you just—don't worry. I know you've got a great question too. I didn't even see you down there.

Health Care

Q. Hello, Mr. President.

The President. How are you?

Q. Welcome to southwest Florida. In light of the fact that you've inherited an economic crisis, where does your priority lie with health care reform?

The President. Well, it's a great question, and I think it is—there are some people who are making the argument that, "Well, you can't do anything about health care because the economy comes first." They don't understand that health care is the biggest component of our economy, and when it's broken that affects everything. I mean, we've got a system right now where the average person has seen—even if they've got health insurance, the average family has seen their premiums double over the last 8 years. Folks are paying twice as much. Copayments have gotten higher; deductibles have gotten higher. And now, with people losing their jobs, they're also losing their health care.

Businesses are also less competitive because of the fact that here in the United States, we spend more than anybody else does. Any other nation on Earth, per capita, we spend more on health care, but we don't get better results. And companies are paying for that. So when they're competing against—you know, if a U.S. carmaker is competing against a foreign carmaker, they've got all these extra health care costs that they've got to deal with.

And finally, Medicare and Medicare—or, Medicare and Medicaid are draining State budgets and Federal budgets in a way that's unsustainable over the long term.

So health care has to be part of the solution. Now, in the recovery package, there are a couple of things that we do immediately. Number one, we're providing some help to Governor Crist and the State because now they are getting more Medicaid claims, and we've got to make sure that they can just meet the basic needs of citizens here in Florida.

Number two is, what we have in this bill is a mechanism so that we will subsidize people to keep their health care even if they lose their job. How many people here know what COBRA is? All right, now, COBRA is the law that says that if you lose your job you can keep your health care, and you go through COBRA. Here's the only problem: If you've lost your job, who can afford \$1,000 a month or \$1,200 a month for health care? You can't afford it. So part of this plan says we will subsidize a significant portion of what your health insurance costs so that you can actually afford to keep your health care. That's number two.

Number three—and this is an example of using a crisis and converting it into an opportunity—one of the problems with our health care system, it is so inefficient, you go into the hospital, and what's the first thing you've got to do? You've got to—even if you've got insurance, what do you have to do? You have to fill out so many forms, and there's paperwork, and there's this, there's that. Then you go and you get your examination, and they've got a clipboard with all this paper on it. Then the doctor is writing out something, and the nurse can't read it, and—[*laughter*]. You know, the fact is, is that it causes huge amounts of medical errors. We've got all this bureaucracy. One of the simplest, most effective things that we could do is to convert from a paper system to a electronic data system.

Now, think about it. Health care is the only area where we still use paper. I mean, the banks, that's all computerized. So if you've got a credit card, that's all on a computer, so they can find you anytime you don't make a payment—[*laughter*]*—and that computer is calculating every dime of interest you've got to pay. Right? It's all very efficient. But when it comes to health care, it's a disaster.*

So what we did is, in this plan, in the House bill that passed, one of the things that we do is, we say we are going to computerize our health care system, institute health IT. That creates jobs right now for people to convert from a paper system to a computer system. But it also pays a long-term dividend by making the health care system more efficient. So now, those are things that we're doing immediately.

We are—also then got to deal with the long-term problem of both cost and coverage. You've got over 45 million people who don't have health insurance, and people who do have health insurance are seeing their costs rise too fast. And so in addition to computerizing the health care system, we've got to emphasize prevention. We've got to make sure that people have regular check-ups. We made a downpayment on it this week. And I did it, by the way, with the help of a lot of these Members of Congress, by passing a new SCHIP, that's the children's health insurance bill that provides millions of children, who didn't have health insurance, health insurance.

My hope is, over the course of the year, I'm going to be able to work with Congress to move forward a bill that gets us on track to every single person in America being able to get affordable, decent health care coverage. We are a wealthy enough country to do it, and that's going to be one of my top priorities as President of the United States.

All right, it's a guy's turn. It's a guy's turn. Let's see, this gentleman in the cap right here. That's you. Who else got the—oh, I didn't see that one. [*Laughter*] All right, well, this guy right here, this guy. Hold on—no, no, I'm calling on this guy right here.

Job Creation/Credit Situation

Q. Also, welcome, Mr. President.

The President. Thank you.

Q. And my question to you today is, as you stated earlier, there are many of us here in the area that are unemployed and that have been unemployed for some time. And probably some people here have large families. And we have had the opportunity to receive unemployment, but yet we have not been able to get any other type of governmental assistance to help us during this crisis so that we can kind of be able to take the funds that we do have from unemployment to pay our bills.

Usually what happens is that when you apply for governmental assistance, they say, well, you made too much money. If you go from making \$3,000 a year—a month to \$1,100 a month, how are you able to take care of your family? Why can't we have that to be automatic that goes along with your unemployment tenure, that you can get government assistance that's an automatic for you?

The President. Well, look, unemployment insurance is not ideal. People want a job; they don't want unemployment insurance. But when the jobs aren't out here, it's tough. But I want to be honest with you, we are bumping up unemployment insurance. As I said, tens of thousands of people will be getting an extra hundred dollars a month, which doesn't sound like a lot, but that means an extra bill that you can pay.

I'll be honest with you, though, we're not going to be able to take it from 1,100 up to 3,000. So our priority has to be on job creation. We can reform unemployment insurance to make it more efficient, we have extended it, but ultimately, people want to work. And the priority of this package is to create jobs: create jobs in construction; create jobs in the health care system; create jobs in energy.

Something that we haven't talked about is the whole opportunity around clean energy. I mean, this package proposes to double our use of alternative fuels. It proposes that we weatherize homes all across the country. It proposes that we are starting a smart grid that allows energy—let's say you have solar energy produced in Florida; the smart grid would allow us to transport that energy to other States so that Florida could be an energy exporter. But right now we don't have the infrastructure in place to get that done.

So my priority is going to be on job creation. That is priority number one.

One other point that I want to make, because it hasn't come up; it came up a little bit with respect to the issue of housing. This recovery package, even if we pass it, is just one leg in the stool. In order to get the economy moving, we're also going to have to deal with the foreclosure crisis. We're also going to have to start getting banks and financial institutions to lend again, because right now there's a credit crunch out there. And a lot of small businesses that are out there, they're having trouble making payroll just because they can't get loans.

So we've got to get the lending moving again. And that's part of what my Treasury Secretary talked about today, working with the banks, tracking what they're doing. We already spent \$350 billion, and that averted catastrophe, but what it didn't do is to create a clear, consistent, transparent credit process whereby we could see small businesses, consumers actually getting loans. And we're going to have to make that a top priority as we move ahead.

It's going to take some time because, frankly, the banks borrowed a lot of money, and they risked it on a lot of bad investments. And unwinding that and restabilizing the system is going to take some time. And I know how frustrating it is for taxpayers when they're looking and they're saying, "Let me get this straight; you've got a guy who's making \$20 million a year, who ran his bank into the ground, and now we've got to come in and clean up the mess." Now, that's something that, it just makes you mad. I understand that.

But recognize that whether we like it or not, credit is the lifeblood of our economy. If consumers can't borrow for a car loan, then cars don't move out of the dealership. And if the dealership can't move its cars, then Detroit and all those suppliers aren't going to be making cars. And on and on it goes. So we've got to do something about getting credit flowing again, and that's going to be one of my top priorities as President.

All right, there's the young lady who I—who I thought—who thought I had called on her and I hadn't. I don't want her mad at me. *[Laughter]* She'll talk about me. *[Laughter]*

Economic Recovery and Reinvestment Plan

Q. Thank you for taking my question, Mr. President.

The President. Sure, go ahead.

Q. I'm just tickled pink that you came to visit us.

The President. Oh, thank you.

Q. Your stimulus package outlines over \$800 billion. And I know a huge portion of it is designated for giving individual States the money that they need to rebuild. Is there any provisions in your stimulus package that actually will give back to the taxpayers individually, that we'd all get stimulus checks—

The President. Yes.

Q. —to jumpstart the economy—

The President. Yes.

Q. And what provisions or what amounts are they actually looking at for the taxpayers?

The President. Here's what we're looking at, is—and this is actually a commitment that I made during the campaign. I said that we had to change our tax system where, instead of giving all the tax breaks to the wealthiest few, that we start giving tax breaks to middle class families who are struggling to make ends meet. So I made that commitment even before the crisis.

So in the package that we put forward, what we have is \$1,000 for working families, \$1,000 in additional, immediate tax relief that would start flowing right away. And so it would offset a lot of the payroll taxes that people are paying. And that would be—again, \$1,000 may not sound a lot—like a lot to some, but I tell you what, if you're making \$30,000, \$40,000, \$50,000 a year, having an extra \$1,000 during some tight times can really make a difference. So that is a central part of the package.

We've also got some other tax cuts that are targeted at small businesses because, again, they're under enormous pressure right now as business is declining. But part of what I hope to do is to show that by providing tax cuts directly to the middle class, that's the best way to reinvigorate the economy when it comes to tax cuts, not just giving tax cuts and expecting it all to trickle down. If you put it directly into the pockets of people who are really going to need it, then they spend it. And when they spend it, that means that the economy is moving. And that's what we're going to try to do in this package. All right?

Okay, gentleman's turn. By the way, I just want to announce that the Senate just passed our recovery and reinvestment plan. That's good. So that's good news; that's good news. That's because—that's good news. That's good news, and I want to thank all the Members of the Senate who moved the process forward. We've still got to get the House bill and the Senate bill to match up before it gets sent to my desk, so we've got a little more work to do over the next couple of days. But it's a good start. And you know why it passed? Because they knew I was coming down to Fort Myers. They didn't want to mess with folks in Fort Myers. Right? They said, "We don't want folks in Fort Myers mad at us." [Laughter]

All right. Gentleman back there in the blue shirt and the tie. Right there.

Education/Economic Recovery and Reinvestment Plan

Q. Good afternoon, Mr. President. First of all, I wanted to thank you very much for coming to listen to us today.

The President. Thank you.

Q. This has not happened in the last 8 years. My name is Andy Irvin. I'm a local commercial contractor here in town. We have been building and remodeling schools for the last 10 years or so. How, in your stimulus plan, do you get money down to the States and down to the counties to continue that program?

The President. Well, what we would do, and the fact that there's already a program in place will make it that much easier, we would be working with Governor Crist and Alex Sink and others in the State government, as well as local school superintendents in county governments, and where there's a school that needs repair, we'd go in and repair it.

But what we'd also want to do—we're not looking just to put on some new paint. I mean, that's nice. But let me give you an example of some of the things that we can do. There are a lot of schools in this country that don't have state-of-the-art science laboratories. And for us to

not only modify the building, but also to go into some of these classrooms and redesign them in ways that allow kids to get state-of-the-art learning in science and math, I mean, that's a gift that keeps on giving.

So, if there's a mechanism in place, then what we're going to do is we're going to make sure that that money is funneled as quickly as possible to those local school districts in those schools that need help. And, hopefully, you'll be able to get some work, and you'll be able to keep your folks on payroll. And that will make all the difference in the world for the economy generally here in Fort Myers. All right? Okay.

This young lady has been waiting very patiently. And she's just been standing there and making me look all guilty. [Laughter] So go ahead. Here, you've got the microphone right behind you.

Unemployment and Homelessness

Q. Thank you very much. I first want to say I respect you, and I am so grateful for you.

The President. Thank you.

Q. I've been praying for you.

The President. I believe in prayer, so I appreciate that.

Q. I have an urgent need on unemployment and homelessness, a very small vehicle for my family and I to live in. We need urgent—and the housing authority has 2-year waiting lists. And we need something more than a vehicle and the parks to go to. We need our own kitchen and our own bathroom. Please help.

The President. Well, I—listen, I—what's your name? What's your name?

Q. It's Henrietta Hughes.

The President. Okay, Ms. Hughes. Well, we're going to do everything we can to help you. But there are a lot of people like you. And we're going to do everything we can, all right? But the—I'll have my staff talk to you after this, after the town hall, all right?

All right. Back here. These folks have been neglected back here. The gentleman right here. Just go ahead and give him the mike, because I don't want him to fall over.

Economic Recovery and Reinvestment Plan

Q. Mr. President, I'm a retired high school teacher, and I have this question. Last night, I was so impressed by your news conference; I haven't heard this in 8 years. My question was about your stimulus package. You said we have to be patient. The American people are notorious for not being patient. [Laughter] How are you going to deal with that problem?

The President. Well, look, my—first of all, I think the American people understand, as I said before, that we didn't get into this fix overnight, and we're not going to get out of it overnight. I think people understand that it is a big and very complicated problem, and that we're going to have to try a bunch of different things to get the economy moving again.

My hope is, is that the American people expect from me the same thing that I expect from myself, which is not to have every answer or to never make a mistake, but to feel like every day me and my staff, that we are thinking about you and your lives; that we're talking to the most knowledgeable people on these problems; that we're making the best decisions for what's good for working families and middle class folks, and not just the powerful and the well-connected;

that we are open to any idea, whether it comes from a Democrat or a Republican or a vegetarian—[*applause*]*—*or a—it doesn't matter—and that we are going to be working as hard as we can to solve these problems.

Now, you know, that is how I judge myself every single day. I ask myself: Did I work as hard as I could? Did I seek out the best possible advice? Did I stay focused on the people who sent me to Washington? And if I—if something is not working and I make a mistake, am I open-minded enough to admit it and then move on and try something else that works? And that's the best I can do.

Now, look, I won't lie to you. If it turns out that a few years from now people don't feel like the economy has turned around, that we're still having problems, that folks are still unemployed, that our health care system is not more efficient, then, you know, you guys won't applaud me next time I come down here, you know. [*Laughter*] There may be a couple of die-hards, Obama folks out there, but—[*applause*]*—*but, you know. So, I mean, I expect to be judged by results. And there's no excuse—I'm not going to make any excuses. If stuff hasn't worked and people don't feel like I've led the country in the right direction, then you'll have a new President.

But I do think the American people understand that these are some really big, tough problems, and it's going to take some time for us to get ourselves out of it. And I have great faith in the American people and their basic wisdom.

So, all right, we've got, young lady right here. Yes, go ahead.

Transportation Infrastructure

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. I'm so grateful to be able to call you that. I met you in Boston in 2004 and was so impressed by you and got to speak with you.

The President. Thank you so much. I appreciate that.

Q. I'm now an elected official myself. I serve on the city council in Bonita Springs, Florida. Hey, Bonita. My mayor is here, as well. He endorsed you.

The President. Good to see you, Mr. Mayor. I like that in you. [*Laughter*]

Q. Yes, he's a good man and my fellow councilman. Cities throughout Florida are having a difficult time because of the mortgage crisis. Growth has slowed. We fund our transportation infrastructure needs through impact fees. Now that we're not getting that, we're falling behind in our ability to keep up with road work, municipal water projects, being able to bring some solar panel down here to an inland port. We need commuter rail. We need lots of things for infrastructure in this State. If we ran out of oil today, we would not be able to move anything around in this State, honest to God. And I hope you're going to help get that thing in the gulf—to turn that around. We don't want to drill oil in the gulf, thank you. Right on. We've got a beautiful, pristine State.

So I want to ask you, how will we get our State going again in transportation? I'm very worried about our dependence on foreign oil, and I don't want to drill in the gulf. I want some commuter rail, and I want to improve our transportation. Thank you.

The President. Well, we have targeted billions of dollars at infrastructure spending. And States all across the country are going through what Florida is going through. There was a study done by the American Association of Engineers—that might not be the exact title, but engineers from all across the country. We get a "D" in infrastructure all across the country. We

saw what happened in Minneapolis, where a bridge collapsed and resulted in tragedy. And not only do we need to rebuild our roads and our bridges, our ports, our levees, our dams, but we also have to plan for the future.

This is the same example of turning crisis into opportunity. This should be a wake-up call for us. You go to Shanghai, China right now, and they've got high-speed rail that puts our railroads to shame. They've got ports that are state of the art. Their airports are—compared to the airports that we—you go through Beijing Airport, and you compare that to Miami Airport? Now, look, the—this is America.

We are—we always had the best infrastructure. We were always willing to invest in the future. You know, somebody—Governor Crist mentioned Abraham Lincoln. He—in the middle of the Civil War, in the midst of all this danger and peril, what did he do? He helped move the intercontinental railroad. He helped to start land grant colleges. He understood that even when you're in the middle of crisis you've got to keep your eye on the future.

So, transportation, when it—is not just fixing our old transportation systems, but it's also imagining new transportation systems. That's why I'd like to see high-speed rail where it can be constructed. I would like for us to invest in mass transit because potentially that's energy efficient. And I think people are a lot more open now to thinking regionally, in terms of how we plan our transportation infrastructure. The days where we're just building sprawl forever, those days are over. I think that Republicans, Democrats, everybody recognizes that that's not a smart way to design communities.

So we should be using this money to help spur this kind of innovative thinking when it comes to transportation. That will make a big difference. All right?

Okay, I've only got time for one more question. I feel bad about it. All right, it's got to be a guy. So, women, you got to all sit down. Women, you got to all sit down. It's got to be a man. All right. I'm going to call on this guy, because he had the cap, and he thought I had called on him and I didn't. So all right, right here. The guy with the cap, last question. Of course, now it better be a good one. Go ahead.

Taxes/Benefit Reforms

Q. Oh, it is such a blessing to see you, Mr. President. Thank you for taking time out of your day. Oh, gracious God, thank you so much.

The President. All right, what's the question? [*Laughter*]

Q. All right, Mr. President, my name is Julio Osegueda. I'm currently a student at Edison State College in my second semester. And, okay, I've been at the same job, which is McDonald's, for 4 ½ years because of the fact that I can't find another job. Now, with the fact that I've been there for as long as I've been there, do you have any plan or any idea of making one that has been there for a long time receive any better benefits than what they've already received?

The President. Well, I tell you what. First of all, a couple things I'd like to say. Number one, the fact that you are working as hard as you're working at a job that I know doesn't always pay as well as some other jobs, I think that's a source of pride for you that shows that you're doing the right thing.

Now, the second thing is, is that you will actually benefit from the tax breaks that we're talking about, so you'll be able to keep a little bit of extra money because we're going to offset

your payroll tax. That's going to help. I don't—I assume that you're not getting health care through your job, and so one of the things that we want to do is reform the health care system so that you all have access to health care in your job.

But the thing that I'm really interested in is, you say you're going to school, what are you studying?

Q. I'm looking to study and majoring in communications. Hopefully, being a broadcaster or a disc jockey.

The President. Well, you sound like you've got a good communications skills.

Q. Thank you so much.

The President. So part of what we want to do is we want to make it easier for you to afford going to college by giving you this refundable tax credit for your tuition. Because young people like Julio, who have that much enthusiasm and that much energy, we've got to make sure that we are giving them a pathway so that they can educate themselves and go as far as their dreams take them.

Thank you very much, Fort Myers. I appreciate you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:11 p.m. at the Harborside Event Center. In his remarks, he referred to Ben L. Nelson, mayor, Bonita Springs, FL.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Economy, national :: Fort Myers, FL

Locations: Fort Myers, FL.

Names: Adkins, Bailey; Adkins, Josie; Adkins, Michelle; Adkins, Steve; Boyd, F. Allen, Jr.; Brown, Corrine; Castor, Kathy; Crist, Charles J., Jr.; Geithner, Timothy F.; Grayson, Alan; Hughes, Henrietta; Humphrey, Jim; Irvin, Andy; Klein, Ron; Kosmas, Suzanne M.; Meek, Kendrick B.; Naik, Jyoti; Nelson, Ben L.; Osegueda, Julio; Palmer, Adam; Sink, Adelaide "Alex"; Wasserman Schultz, Deborah; Wexler, Robert.

Subjects: Business and industry : Credit freeze situation; Business and industry : Home loan industry; Economy, national : Corporate responsibility; Economy, national : Credit markets, stabilization efforts; Economy, national : Economic concerns; Economy, national : Financial legislation; Economy, national : Recession, effects; Education : Postsecondary education :: Tax credits, expansion; Education : School improvement and renovation; Employment and unemployment : Job creation and growth; Employment and unemployment : Job losses; Employment and unemployment : Job training assistance; Employment and unemployment : Unemployment insurance; Energy : Alternative and renewable sources and technologies; Florida : Governor; Florida : President's visits; Florida : Unemployment rate; Florida, President's visits; Health and medical care : Cost control reforms; Health and medical care : Health insurance, protection of coverage; Health and medical care : Information technology; Health and medical care : Medicare and Medicaid; Health and medical care : Uninsured citizens; Housing : Foreclosure rates; Housing : Housing market, decline; Indiana : Unemployment rate; Taxation : Tax Code :: Reform; Taxation : Tax relief; Transportation : Highway system, modernization efforts; Health and Human Services, Department of : State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP).

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