

Vice President Joe Biden arrives in Miami-Dade, touts stimulus

Vice President Joe Biden touted the promise of transportation stimulus money and help for the middle class during the first day of his South Florida visit

By Alfonso Chardy & Evan S. Benn

On the first day of his two-day visit to South Florida, Vice President Joe Biden struck a populist tone in promising to fight for workers' rights and promoting the millions of federal stimulus dollars being pumped into local transportation projects.

Biden, who will visit with Miami police officers Friday while his wife tours Miami Dade College, told labor leaders Thursday at Miami Beach's Fontainebleau Resort that he and President Barack Obama are committed to helping middle-class workers.

"We will judge the success or failure of our administration based on whether or not the standard of living of the middle class has increased," Biden said to the AFL-CIO Executive Committee and about 100 other labor supporters. "Neither one of us believes it can get better without you getting stronger."

From Miami Beach, Biden headed to the future site of the Miami Intermodal Center, just east of Miami International Airport, where the Florida Department of Transportation is overseeing construction of a \$1.7 billion transit hub. Biden said the federal government will provide stimulus money for six hybrid buses that Miami-Dade Transit plans to buy. Each bus costs about \$850,000, county transit director Harpal Kapoor said. Stimulus dollars also will help pay for a Greyhound station at the Miami Intermodal Center.

"This project is about the future," Biden said at the MIC site. "It makes it possible for more people to get out of their cars and into public transit, from the beginning to the end of their trips."

Biden was accompanied to the event by U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Alvarez, Miami Mayor Manny Diaz and state transportation officials.

REQUESTS

After Biden's speech, Alvarez told The Miami Herald that he told LaHood that the county wants federal help to build a \$1 billion tunnel to the Port of Miami and to construct a \$119.5 million segment of an elevated truck highway.

Overall, Miami-Dade expects to get the largest portion of the stimulus package in South Florida -- more than \$260 million for roads, bridges, transit and transportation projects. Broward's share is expected to be about \$70 million.

Florida expects to receive about \$1.3 billion for transportation projects.

The vice president's remarks to labor leaders Thursday marked one of the first times the union's executive council let in the press, but Biden insisted that print reporters be allowed to cover the speech as part of his "unprecedented commitment to transparency," spokeswoman Elizabeth Alexander said.

'NOT RIGHT'

Biden received a rousing ovation when he mentioned the Employee Free Choice Act that the Obama administration has proposed and when he took a swipe at corporate executives.

"It's just not right when the average CEO makes \$10,000 more every day than what the average worker makes every year," Biden said.

"We're not asking for anything we don't deserve. We just want to level the playing field again. I have a simple, basic belief: If a union is what you want, a union you're entitled to have."

Persuading Congress to pass the act is one of organized labor's top priorities. The proposed law would require companies to negotiate with a union if a majority of workers sign cards for that purpose.

It also would allow for binding arbitration if the sides were unable to reach an agreement on wages and working conditions. And it would increase the penalties for companies that violate labor laws by firing or harassing union supporters.

Supporters say the law would make a more level playing field between unions and employers, make it easier for workers to form a union, increase union membership and therefore increase wages. But business groups are fighting the law, saying it would create government intrusion into the private sector and would lead to hundreds of thousands of jobs being cut.

Biden spoke for about 45 minutes before taking questions from labor leaders in a conference room at the resort.

MONEY FOR POLICE

On Friday morning, Biden plans to visit the Miami Police Department, where he will be joined once again by Diaz and by Police Chief John Timoney.

His theme: more than \$4 billion in stimulus money for state and local law enforcement.

While Biden talks with police, his wife, Jill Biden, will be touring Miami Dade College's downtown Miami campus with U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. It will be Duncan's first official visit to a higher-education institution since taking office.

Miami Dade is among the nation's largest colleges, with more than 160,000 students.