

# Foster's Online

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## Obama holds forum at Rochester VFW

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ROCHESTER — Presidential candidates normally tell voters why they would make the best leader, but Barack Obama took a different tack Tuesday.

He said it was fine if voters backed another Democrat. In fact, he urged them to if they weren't going to support him.

"This is too important an election to sit out. There's too much at stake," Obama told around 200 people at the end of an hourlong public forum at the George J. Maxfield VFW Post 1772.

That's not to say he didn't present himself as the best individual able to handle a health-care system he described as "bankrupting" families, an inadequate education system or an energy policy that sends nearly \$1 billion a day to "hostile" nations and contributes to melting of the polar ice caps.

Other issues he touched on included veterans and children going homeless, stopping climate change, creating affordable housing, combating substance abuse, supporting mental health programs and forgiving a "sizable portion" of student loans for college graduates going into teaching or social work.

Progress will not be made on any of these issues so long as American troops are in Iraq, Obama said.

As cameras snapped nonstop capturing Obama's first visit to Rochester, Obama said even if he were president today it would "probably take a year to responsibly" to bring troops home.

The question then becomes, "How do we make sure that they can come home safely and not endanger each other and themselves, and how do we prevent complete collapse of the Iraqi government ...?" he said. "That's the tricky part. There's no on/off switch."

Obama, 45, a freshman U.S. senator from Illinois, has a proposal before Congress that would to begin redeploying troops no later than May 1,



with the goal to remove all combat brigades by March 31. It allows for the redeployment to be suspended if Iraqis meet benchmarks and it's approved by Congress.

Obama said if President Bush vetoes Congress' war appropriation bill setting a timetable to withdraw troops, lawmakers need to find other ways to "constrain" his ability to continue the war "so at some point we're ratcheting up the pressure on him."

As Obama seeks his party's nomination to become president in 2008, he has stressed that unlike other leading candidates he opposed the war before it began, when he was an Illinois state legislator.

A woman in the audience questioned why voters should believe Obama will cut defense spending waste as president since he votes to support the department's current budgets. "I don't have the capacity to strip all the waste in the Pentagon budget as it's currently structured," he said. "As president I craft the budget, and so I can then prioritize and make decisions as to how the federal budget ... should be structured."

Unlike his appearance at the University of New Hampshire, where there was a crowd of at least 2,500, Tuesday's forum didn't feature music introducing the candidate or sign-waving supporters. It gave him a better chance to interact with voters on a more personal level. When the official program ended, he met with well-wishers, answered more questions and

**U.S. Sen. Barack Obama speaks to the crowd who gathered at the VFW post in Rochester Tuesday. The town-meeting style gathering featured many questions on the minds of voters. (Aaron Leclerc/Staff photographer)**

discussed veterans' long waits at Veterans Affairs hospitals.

While he fielded questions, Obama stood in the middle of the hall, anchoring rows of folding chairs set up around him. Each time he finished addressing an issue, dozens of hands went up.

Most voters interviewed said they liked Obama, but would hold out support until they heard from other candidates. Claire Williams, a retired nurse, said she was struck by Obama's stamina.

"He talked for an hour and he took one drink of water. You know he's healthy," she said.

Susan Dushane, a former Claremont resident who now resides in Brookline, Mass., said Obama offered substantive answers to people's questions. "Did you hear his answer about funding college? I was astounded at how much command he has," she said. "He's fresh and he's clearly not just spouting campaign rhetoric." To improve education Obama said the key is "drastically" expanding early



childhood education, offering teachers better pay and support and emphasizing math and science to "re-instill a sense" those subjects are critical for future generations to compete globally.

Donnie McCullough, a city firefighter, said he remains undecided on who he will support, but he had praise for Obama. "He came across very well. I thought he was a very good communicator and I thought he was genuine," he said. "He still is short on specifics as are the rest of the candidates, and hopefully as the campaigns continue they'll get more specific."

Dover resident Matt Mayberry, who is active in Republican politics, said despite supporting John McCain's bid for his party's nomination he wanted to hear what Obama had to offer. "I think every candidate has something valuable to say, and it's our job as New Hampshire citizens to listen," he said, holding a copy of Obama's book.

Earlier, Mayberry asked Obama about a stem cell bill he is co-sponsoring in Congress. Obama said stem cell research "is not a magic potent," but what "it does promise is progress" to Parkinson's disease, juvenile diabetes and other illnesses affecting millions of people.

"The only reason we wouldn't do it is if there was a significant moral rationale for not pursuing stem cell research," he said, noting the legislation calls for using embryos that are to be discarded.

Obama called for universal health care, saying he wants to be held accountable to having it in place "by the end of my first term as president." It would be accomplished by saving money in the existing system, funding more preventive care, better managing chronic illnesses and investing in new technology to end a paper-based medical records system, he said.

Carl Brown, a Vietnam veteran from Middleton, said he agreed with Obama that the National Guard is being overextended and the health care system needs to change "because there are so many people who need it that don't have it."

Obama said "we should talk" to Iran over concerns the country is developing nuclear weapons. Walter Hoerman, co-chair of the Rochester Democrats, said residents can expect more candidates to visit the city as the first-in-the-nation primary nears. "It's nice for them to pay attention just like they always do to Manchester and Nashua," he said.