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Biden energizes crowd at ARC

VP nominee criticizes McCain-Palin.

By **JASON ROSENBAUM** of the Tribune's staff
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Parker Eshelman photos

Vice presidential candidate Sen. Joe Biden touches the chin of Dawn Zeterberg as he visits with her and Kathleen Weinschenk, left, after his town hall meeting this morning at the Activity & Recreation Center.

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Vice presidential aspirant Joe Biden spoke this morning to a packed and supportive crowd at the Activity & Recreation Center in Columbia, the latest stop on a town hall tour to boost Sen. Barack Obama's presidential bid.

Biden, a Democratic senator from Delaware, made his pitch to about 1,000 people on the ARC's basketball courts, perhaps an appropriate venue to defend the Democratic ticket and make a few offensive maneuvers against Arizona Sen. John McCain and Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin.



Biden speaks at the ARC, his first visit to Missouri as the Democratic vice presidential nominee. An audience of 933 attended, Columbia fire Division Chief Steve Sapp said.

While Biden praised McCain as a longtime friend and complimented Palin on her "compelling" personal story, he chided the pair for failing to come up with significant ideas to improve the economy, stem the flow of jobs overseas and bring a conclusion to the Iraq war.

He noted that closures of automobile plants in Missouri and an increasing unemployment rate nationally was adding to increased anxiety among Americans. And he said neither candidate used last week's

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Republican National Convention to provide ideas that could alleviate concerns on the economy or health care.

"Name me one single, solitary policy that they put forward on the matters that truly affect the lives of so many middle-class Americans who are struggling," Biden said.

Biden, who voted to authorize the Iraq war but later became critical of the conflict, also chastised McCain for not supporting a timetable to withdraw U.S. troops from the country. "Ladies and gentlemen, John and his running mate are the only people who don't get it," he said, noting that President George W. Bush and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki are holding talks to draw down troops.

Biden also addressed a handful of questions from the audience. When asked by a questioner about what the ticket would do to help senior citizens, Biden pointed to Obama's proposal to eliminate taxes for some senior citizens. He also said the ticket would oppose "privatizing" Social Security, one of many lines that brought applause from the crowd.

After speaking for about an hour, Biden departed for another event at a school in the St. Louis area.

Biden's visit to Missouri comes in the midst of a greater focus on the Show-Me State. The state has typically voted for the ultimate victor in presidential contests. McCain and Palin held a rally in Lee's Summit yesterday, a little more than a week after the pair hosted a sizable rally at a baseball stadium in O'Fallon. McCain was supposed to make a stop in Columbia yesterday, but his campaign decided to hold a rally in the Kansas City-area instead.

Missouri will be the stage for perhaps the most anticipated event related to the vice presidency - the first and only debate between Palin and Biden. The pair will debate Oct. 2 at Washington University in St. Louis.

Biden's reputation as a hard-nosed debater was alluded to before he took the stage.

"Joe Biden's mom taught him right. ... Respect hard work. Don't back down. Fight for what you know is right. And - if you have to - bloody some noses," said state Rep. Judy Baker, D-Columbia, who is running for Congress.

Audience members, some of whom had to stand to watch the address, were largely enthusiastic. They gave Biden regular standing ovations and thunderous applause throughout the one-hour address.

One person who approved of Biden's visit to Mid-Missouri was Fulton resident Zachary Hopkins. He said Biden seemed more ready to deal with foreign relations than Palin. "I know for sure that Sen. Biden is more experienced than a soccer mom that's been the mayor of a small town with a population of about 9,000," Hopkins said. "We need somebody who is experienced and who can deal with the foreign nations that are pretty much being aggressive with us today."

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