

Romney Wants Presidential Trade Power

By Amy Lorentzen
Associated Press
November 1, 2007

DECORAH, Iowa — Republican Mitt Romney said Thursday that Washington must act to open more foreign markets to American products and the president should have new authority to negotiate such trade agreements.

The presidential candidate proposed what he called a "Reagan Zone of Economic Freedom" that would include U.S. free-trade partners such as Europe that commit to opening up markets and "playing by the rules." Such an alliance could operate inside and outside the World Trade Organization to push for trade agreements as well as labor, environmental and other reforms.

Romney released his trade proposal Thursday and spoke about some of his ideas during a campaign stop at Luther College in Decorah.

"How else do you strengthen the economy? You open up markets for American goods. If there are markets that won't let our goods in on a fair basis, you push them in there," he told a crowd of about 400 people. "Keep those doors open, don't block off our ability to compete with the rest of the world, let us get into other markets."

Romney challenged China and others who shut the U.S. out of agreements, and he said that as Asian countries grow and develop they will bring new trade opportunities.

"They have been steeped in poverty for generations. Now, a billion new people come into the work force. That's really an opportunity for us to sell goods and services, software, hardware, movies, cars, all sorts of things, to a part of the world who could never afford them," he said.

"But it's also a challenge because they are hardworking, innovative people, and there are a lot of them, and they are going to be a lot tougher to compete with than Europe has been."

Romney, a former Massachusetts governor who amassed a vast personal fortune as a venture capitalist, said that a president who is going to expand the economy through new trade agreements needs his kind of experience.

"Governors tend to have experience running something, and the government of the United States is the largest enterprise in the world," he said. Of his Democratic rivals, he said: "Not one of them has ever run a corner store."

In his policy proposal, Romney calls on Americans to "reject the Democrats' policies of retreat from the world."

"Denying America the ability to negotiate to open markets while our competitors gain advantages is no strategy," his proposal says.

Many of the Democrats who control Congress and their labor and environmental allies are leery of free-trade deals, saying they lead to jobs being moved overseas and to the exploitation of foreign workers and the environment.

Earlier this year, Congress stripped President Bush of trade promotion authority, which allows presidents to negotiate "fast track" trade agreements without intervention from Congress. Since 1975, only one other president, Bill Clinton, has been stripped of that authority, which was designed to speed the reduction of trade barriers and open new markets with other countries.

Romney says the president should have the trade promotion authority because the U.S. cannot afford to be cut out of any more deals. He says the U.S. is excluded from more than 300 trade agreements globally.

Rather than promoting new free trade accords, some lawmakers want the government to concentrate on rewriting old deals such as the North American Free Trade Agreement, going after countries such as China that manipulate their currencies, strengthening product safety and pushing anti-sweatshop legislation.

During the stop in Decorah, Romney was booed by a handful of college students when answering a question about same-sex marriage. He didn't seem fazed by the reaction and said he's the only front-running Republican who supports a federal amendment to define marriage as between a man and a woman.

"I believe that maintaining the strength of the marriage relationship, the family relationship, is critical to the strength of the entire society," he said.

Craig Keisler, a 22-year-old senior at Luther College, said he asked the question of Romney because he has friends who are homosexual. Keisler thinks the country should embrace their relationships.

"We're somehow placing a second tier of citizenship to homosexual couples," said Keisler, who added that he was not among those who heckled Romney.