

McCain to hit hard on free trade in hard-hit town

By David Jackson
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THOMASVILLE, Ala. — Sen. John McCain heads for a battleground of the free-trade fight today. Youngstown, Ohio, is a struggling steel town where jobs have been lost and free-trade deals are unpopular.

McCain, however, is prepared to argue the overall benefits of unfettered trade, aides said. "Protectionism devastates the economy," said Steve Schmidt, a senior adviser to McCain.

In an economic speech last week, McCain said: "When new trading partners can sell in our market, and American companies can sell in theirs, the gains are great and they are lasting."

As McCain conducts a town hall meeting at Youngstown State University, he will be fewer than 10 miles from the Pennsylvania border, a state where Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama are battling it out in a pivotal primary today. Both Democrats have pledged to revamp U.S. trade policy.

McCain, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, visits Youngstown as part of the "It's Time for Action Tour," aimed at what he called "forgotten" Americans who may have been left behind by the rush of the global economy.

On Monday, he visited Alabama. In Selma, he honored the death-defying voters' rights movement of the 1960s.

The Arizona senator then went to Gee's Bend, where descendants of slaves sew colorful, world-renowned quilts. About a dozen elderly women serenaded McCain with gospel songs aboard the ferry that connects the remote wooded area with the mainland across the Alabama River.

On the Thomasville campus of Alabama Southern Community College, McCain said such schools can retrain displaced workers and improve the quality of teaching.

"Community colleges are indispensable to our future prosperity," he said.

Worker retraining is the focus of McCain's appearance in Youngstown, campaign spokeswoman Brooke Buchanan said. As with other stops this week, he will discuss "innovative ways we can increase prosperity in some of the cities and areas across the country that unfortunately have been left behind."

In the Democratic primary, Clinton and Obama have agreed with voters who say the rules of free trade make it too easy for employers to move jobs overseas, especially industrial jobs in states like Ohio and Pennsylvania.

Both Democratic candidates proposed amending the North American Free Trade Agreement with Canada and Mexico. The Pennsylvania primary takes place as President Bush — a strong proponent of free trade — wraps up an annual summit in New Orleans with the leaders of the other NAFTA nations.

Stacie Paxton, Democratic National Committee spokeswoman, said McCain is "out of touch with what's happening in Youngstown," and offers only "a third Bush term."

Schmidt said voters face a "big choice" on such economic issues as free trade and that "Democratic economic plans are a recipe for disaster."