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Biden brings renewable energy to select stimulus roundtable

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When Vice President Joe Biden invited seven business leaders to a roundtable discussion on the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act in New York City on June 2, only John Berger was from Texas.

The CEO of Houston-based Standard Renewable Energy, joined Biden, Deputy Secretary of the Treasury Neal Wolin, New York Gov. David Paterson and six other private-sector businessmen at Pace University's Lubin School of Business

Berger indicates the invite didn't come as a complete surprise.

"The jobs we've done, the jobs we've created — eventually the reality gets front and center," he says.

Standard Renewable Energy opened an office in Phoenix this year, he notes, and should see 70 percent growth in the work force by the end of 2009.

Biden set the tone by stating: "The Recovery Act is putting people to work — and our business leaders here today are a testament to that. They are on the front lines of hiring folks for new jobs and preventing layoffs."

Gov. Patterson and Wolin followed Biden's lead. Then the vice president quizzed each of the seven invitees in a sort of panel discussion on what their companies did and how the stimulus applied to them.

Pike Industries Inc., a New Hampshire construction company, avoided a planned layoff of 100 employees and even hired another 100 after receiving a highway contract.

Joe Robson, president of the Robson Co. in Broken Arrow, Okla. and chairman of the National Association of Home Builders, said the \$8,000 tax credit for first-time home-buyers has translated into about 200,000 additional home sales nationwide and helped create more than 70,000 jobs.

Jamiel's Shoe World, a 73-year-old Rhode Island shoe store, received a \$400,000 loan from the Small Business Administration to refinance at a time when banks were saying no.

At a question and answer session, local congressmen and their staff members, professors and students asked questions to the panel.

After joking about the perceived oxymoron in reference to renewable energy and Houston, Biden gave Berger the last word.

Berger told the veep that Houston's greatest asset — the petroleum industry and the people who work in it — would be the source of the city's next boom.

"We're using that talent to build our company within the heart of the U.S. hydrocarbon industry to change the entire industry," he said. "I feel very strongly that the people of Houston are going to lead this change regardless of whether the companies in charge now are going to lead that change or new companies, like Standard Renewable Energy."

Keeping an eye on the home front, Berger was disappointed to learn a bill that would give \$500 million in rebates to utility scale and small-scale solar manufacturing facilities in Texas died as the Texas Legislature broke session in Austin at the end of last week.

"I think it's extreme short-sightedness," Berger says. "We need to have people in the State Legislature stop bickering, stop pointing fingers, stop doing personal attacks. It's childish. It needs to stop."

The bill, which had the votes to pass, was waylaid by political wrangling just before midnight. Berger wouldn't mention names, but State Rep. Sylvester Turner, a Houston Democrat, is widely credited with killing the bill.

"The person that led the charge is a master of parliamentary rules," Berger says. "It was killed on technicalities because of a personal issues that had nothing to do with solar power in Texas."

He says Texas will feel the fallout by losing out on manufacturing plants and by the time the legislature meets again in 2011 it will be too late to recruit more.

"We will have lost the window," he says. "(Manufacturers) will just add on to the (plants) they have. Once you lose, you lose."

Regardless, Berger says the collapse in Austin should not affect stimulus money for renewable energy in Texas, although it could have eased the \$500 million hike in electricity rates that would have funded the rebate.

"We could have used some of the stimulus dollars to augment this program and created way more jobs in the State of Texas," he says.

In New York, Vice President Biden stressed that the key to the success of the stimulus package was setting a foundation for future growth once the money runs out by 2012.

"We have to find the next new thing," Berger says. "What is that going to be? After the 1990 recession it was cell phones and the Internet. In 2000 it was the housing market. Now it will be a new, distributed energy economy that will drive the vast majority of the wealth creation."