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New Push for Making Buildings Energy Efficient

By LAURA MECKLER

WASHINGTON—President Barack Obama on Thursday unveiled tax breaks and other proposals aimed at getting commercial-building owners to retrofit their structures to be more energy efficient, an initiative he hopes to fund with higher taxes on oil and gas companies.

The White House wouldn't say how much the package might cost. But the president, speaking at a visit to Penn State University, challenged corporate, labor and university leaders to join the effort. A White House official said former President Bill Clinton and Jeffrey Immelt, chief executive of General Electric Co., would lead the effort to get the private sector involved in retrofitting buildings.

The program is mostly a set of carrots that the administration hopes will persuade private businesses to invest in retrofitting of existing commercial facilities, including more lucrative tax breaks to blunt the cost and easier access to loans to pay for upgrades. The goal is to increase energy efficiency in commercial buildings nationwide by 20% by 2020.

"Making our buildings more energy-efficient is one of the fastest, easiest and cheapest ways to save money, combat pollution and create jobs right here in the United States of America," Mr. Obama said at Penn State, where he first toured several labs working on energy efficient technologies.

The event and the proposals are part of the White House's new "win the future" economic message, where the president argues that the nation's long-term competitiveness depends on developing clean energy sources and other advances.

Mr. Obama also proposed a new competitive grant program to encourage state and local governments to upgrade their building standards. It is modeled on the Race to the Top program in the Education Department, which prods states to toughen standards and make other overhauls to qualify for grants, an administration official said.

"You show us the best ideas to change your game on the ground; we'll show you the money," the president said.

A spokesman for U.S. House Speaker John Boehner (R., Ohio), Brendan Buck, said that "of course" Republicans support energy efficiency. "Who doesn't?" But he said Republican leaders have questions about the program's details, costs and effectiveness.

"Talking about innovation now is nice, but removing Washington barriers to innovation is what job creators are really looking for," he said.

Ahead of the visit, administration officials hosted a conference call for reporters to outline the initiative but wouldn't answer questions about how much the proposals might cost. They would only say that the programs will be included in the president's budget proposal, out later this month, along with an ocean of other numbers regarding the federal budget.

Asked why they wouldn't disclose the figures on the energy initiative now, one senior administration official said: "There is a lot of information in the budget and it will be out in due course."

Mr. Obama did make clear that he wanted to pay for the tax credits and other initiatives by raising taxes on oil and gas companies, saying they didn't need the money. "They're doing just fine on their own," he said. "It's time to stop subsidizing yesterday's energy. It's time to invest in tomorrow's."

Last year, Mr. Obama's budget called for \$39 billion in tax increases on fossil-fuel producers over 10 years, mostly by closing various tax breaks for oil and natural gas companies. Affected industries opposed the move.

"Singling out the oil and natural gas industry through tax increases [is] bad public policy," said Eric Wohlschlegel, spokesman for the American Petroleum Institute. "It would actually discourage new energy projects and new hiring in one of the nation's most dependable job-creating industries."

—Jared Favole contributed to this article.

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