

Machinists union chief to invite Obama to Wichita

BY MOLLY MCMILLIN

The Wichita Eagle

Machinist's union president Tom Buffenbarger plans to invite President Obama to visit Wichita when the two meet today.

Buffenbarger wants Obama to see the importance of the business jet industry and how it has been hurt by the economy and by negative remarks from Congress about the use of private jets.

Buffenbarger said he will have a brief meeting with Obama after the president addresses the AFL-CIO's annual convention in Pittsburgh, Pa.

"My few moments with him are going to be about this industry," Buffenbarger said Monday from the convention. "Wichita is the aviation center of the universe."

It's time to demonstrate the importance of aviation to the U.S., Buffenbarger said. "We need the president to come out and be a champion for us," he said.

Buffenbarger, who noted that the president's grandmother reportedly worked at Boeing Wichita during World War II, hopes Obama at least will say a few words in support of business aviation.

"Just maybe an encouraging word may be enough to stop the slide we're in or slow it down and... maybe help it get to a rebound a little quicker," he said.

The Machinists have been working with aviation trade groups and with the leaders of Wichita planemakers to encourage Obama to speak out about the benefits of using business aircraft, Buffenbarger said. They have had a preliminary meeting with White House staff, Buffenbarger said.

Obama traveled to Elkhart, Ind., the home of the RV industry, which also has struggled during the economic downturn. Surely, he can do the same for the aviation industry, Buffenbarger said.

"The fact that they're meeting with us is a positive sign," Buffenbarger said.

Since November, Hawker Beechcraft, Cessna Aircraft and Bombardier Learjet have cut production as customers canceled or deferred orders. Together, they have laid off more than 12,000 people, raising the city's unemployment rate to almost 10 percent. In March, city leaders sent Obama a letter inviting him to visit Wichita. And City Council members voted unanimously for a resolution to that effect.

Sedgwick County commissioners passed a resolution in March urging Obama and members of Congress to recognize that the country's national defense and economy depend on the aviation industry. It also was signed by the Wichita Metro Chamber of Commerce, the Wichita Independent Business Association and the Wichita Area Association of Realtors.

Wichita Mayor Carl Brewer said he is in favor of Buffenbarger's request. "Maybe he can talk him into it because I haven't been able to get him to do it," Brewer said. The visit would be beneficial, Brewer said.

"To hear about our aviation industry and hear other people talk about it is one thing," he said. "But when you actually come and you see what we're doing here in the city of Wichita, it has a totally different impact on you."

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