

Bush offers job hope

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WINSTON-SALEM -- Job training and education are the solutions for a troubled economy and the nation's displaced workers, President Bush said Friday during a visit to North Carolina.

Speaking at Forsyth Technical Community College to an audience of about 200 people that included 2004 senatorial candidate U.S. Rep. Richard Burr of Winston-Salem, the president emphasized the importance of creating a "bridge from the textile sector to the technology sector."

"We need an educational system that is flexible to train people for jobs that exist today," he said.

In the meantime, hundreds of people protested the president's visit a few blocks away from the gathering.

During Bush's speech, the president touted the college's educational programs, especially those that are training students for careers in biotechnology. He championed Forsyth Tech as a model school for others to follow.

In June, the school received a \$750,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Labor as part of the Bush administration's High Growth Job Training Initiative.

Bush's emphasis on the economy is particularly relevant for North Carolinians suffering from one of the highest unemployment rates in the nation. In September, the state's unemployment rate was at 6.4 percent, up from 5.8 percent in February.

North Carolina's manufacturing, textile and apparel industries have been hit particularly hard by foreign trade policies.

While the overall number of jobs in the state has

increased since January, the textile, furniture and apparel industries continue to lose thousands of jobs, according to Dan Gerlach, Gov. Mike Easley's senior adviser for fiscal affairs. He also has said that the state has lost 50,000 positions in the textile industry since 2001.

Bush said Friday that the government is spending \$15 billion per year on job training.

During his conversation with Forsyth Tech faculty members and students, he called on Congress to help provide communities with job training grants with few strings attached.

The president spoke optimistically of job training and its impact on the economy. "People who lost work should have hope," he said. "The economy is growing, and new jobs are being created."

As Bush was making his appearance at Forsyth Tech, hundreds of people protested against his policies with a soup and bread line a few blocks away from the college.

Hayes McNeill, vice chairman of the Forsyth County Democratic Party, said he was "outraged" that Bush would come to town and raise money he didn't need. Prior to his appearance at Forsyth Tech, the president kicked off his 2004 re-election campaign with a \$2,000-per-plate luncheon at Winston-Salem's Benton Convention Center.

McNeill said the protesters wanted to organize an event that was an appropriate alternative to Bush's arrival in Winston-Salem. He called the event a success, saying that more than 450 people received a free meal. "We felt a soup line was an apt metaphor."

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Communities for Peace, displaced textile workers and local members of Young Democrats also helped organize the protest. They arranged for speakers and a march to the convention center.

Inside the college, Scott Heimer, a displaced textile industry supervisor, credited Bush's policies with enabling him to go back to school and pursue another career.

"I thank you for the credit, but you get the credit," Bush said. "There are jobs out there, if you can hang on."