

PEORIANS

Continued from Page A1

into three chartered buses and departed at about 7:30 a.m. from the Le Vieux Carre building on Water Street for a drive to Springfield, where Obama announced his candidacy in front of thousands outside the Old State Capitol.

"This is the best \$10 in entertainment I've had in a long time," said Velma Walton of Peoria, referring to the charge for the bus ride. Plenty of coffee and doughnuts were included.

"We wanted to give everyone an opportunity to come to this historic event," Peoria County Democratic Party Chairman Billy Halstead said, adding the bus rentals cost the party \$550 each.

It was the excitement among those on the trip that made it all worthwhile, Halstead said.

So enthused on the ride home was Walton that she demanded Halstead find out where Obama was speaking later in the day. Halstead said the other speeches were being held in Cedar Rapids and Ames, Iowa.

Walton was disappointed that she could not drive to those two cities fast enough to see him. She was hoping Obama was stopping in Davenport, or somewhere closer, so she could drive herself to see him speak again.

Birthday party

Of all the things Donn Frizzi could have done for his 50th birthday, he chose to go to Springfield to watch Obama announce his candidacy.

One person seated near him in the bus shouted, "Where else would you be?"

Frizzi replied, "In bed," before adding, "I thought it would be a great way to party."

Seated next to his sweetheart, Debbie Hademann of Peoria, Frizzi said this birthday was the most memorable since his seventh birthday in 1964. That year, he watched The Beatles perform live on the Ed Sullivan Show.

"I think they are both real good rock stars now," Frizzi said about Obama and The Beatles.

Educational experience

Tammy Hyatt of Pekin brought her son, Austin, 12, along for the trip as a real-world lesson in social studies. Austin, a seventh-grader at Edison Junior High School, will be studying the U.S. Constitution soon.

He was dressed for the occasion in a large Uncle Sam top hat he purchased at Disney World two years ago. Pro-Obama stickers were all over it.

"We felt this was a great opportunity to witness history," his mother said.

Bradley University students also got a chance to witness history.

Erin Bobst, 19, Natalie Winter, 19, and Jamie Turner, 18, all Bradley freshmen, were impressed with Obama's speech and were excited about his position on education.

"I want to see change in government, and he can do it," Winter said.

Teachers also felt the need to see Obama's announcement.

Ryan McLaughlin, a U.S. history teacher within the Chicago Public School District, drove to Peoria late Friday so he could be in Springfield. He was seated in one of the buses with his father, Tom, a representative with the Illinois Federation of Teachers.

While McLaughlin supports Obama, he would've liked to see him "wait a little" before jumping into the race.

"Hopefully there will be a Democrat in office in 2008," he said.

Bus drivers for Obama

Even two of the Peoria Charter drivers were pro-Obama.

Gary Virden, a driver since 1994, said he could not recall chartering a bus to such an important event.

"Pretty much, (I drive to) a lot of basketball games," he said.

Virden, a "diehard Democrat," said he thinks Obama can bring change.

"He is young and fresh," Virden said. "Kind of like (President John F.) Kennedy when he came in."

Driver Jim Williams of Peoria agreed. "I think he's a guy for the people."

Both drivers remained with the buses, parked several blocks from the Old Capitol, listening to the speech on the radio.

O - BA - MA!

Standing outside amid the throngs of heavily bundled people watching Obama's announcement was Todd Holzinger, a Morton resident and business representative with International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 34.

"I think he speaks well and is on top of the issues," Holzinger said. "He represents workers' rights and what is important for unions."

Holzinger and hundreds of people who crowded on Sixth Street in front of the Cold Stone Creamery had a hard time hearing Obama's message. Speakers were pointed away from much of the crowd standing in the back and toward Obama and the media risers where dozens of statewide and national reporters were located.

Perhaps the most audible thing those in the back heard were chants of "Life Yes! Obama No!" from anti-abortion protesters located nearby.

Still, Holzinger pumped his fist in the air after Obama officially announced his candidacy.

Then, the chanting broke out, drowning out that of the protesters: "O - BA - MA!"

A proud senator

Retired state Sen. George Shadid, D-Peoria, was all smiles when the buses returned to Water Street around 12:30 p.m.

Shadid, who served with Obama for about seven years in the State Senate, said hearing Obama's speech brought back memories.

"Some of the things he said, I've heard him say before," Shadid said. "By telling people you need to take responsibility and we need to do things to get together."

Shadid, who was with family and friends on one of the buses, stopped into Kelleher's for lunch after the buses returned to Peoria.

"I'm just pleased I got to know him well in the seven years I served with him," Shadid said, adding he hopes Obama will visit Peoria during his campaign. "We're going to try and bring him here."

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ADAM GERIK/JOURNAL STAR

Ron Phillips of Springfield sells campaign buttons before U.S. Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill. announced his candidacy for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination Saturday in Springfield.

Area Republicans weigh in on Obama

LaHood: 'I'm proud of the fact he's from Illinois'

BY JEREMY PELZER AND MIKE RAMSEY OF COPLEY NEWS SERVICE

SPRINGFIELD — State Republicans gave generally the same reply Saturday when asked what they thought of U.S. Sen. Barack Obama's presidential announcement: nice guy, great speech, wrong message.

Obama declared his candidacy for the 2008 nomination in a speech in front of the Old State Capitol, a popular stop for politicians who are attracted to the site's ties to Abraham Lincoln.

Obama set out a list of goals, including creating a universal health-care plan, ending the Iraq War, improving education, ending poverty and improving ethics in Washington, D.C.

But unlike Lincoln, Obama was vague in offering solutions to these problems, state GOP chairman Andy McKenna said.

"Abraham Lincoln was never a rock star," McKenna said. "He had ideas that he led with that were controversial, that engaged opposition. And I think the question in Senator Obama's campaign is he is a rock star — will he be prepared to embrace ideas that might be innovative and risky, even if it trades off some of his popularity? That didn't happen today."

McKenna also questioned Obama's attempts to tie himself to Lincoln.

"It takes humility to be an effective leader," McKenna said.

State Sen. Dale Risinger, R-Peoria, said Obama was "smooth — but that's what you'd expect out of a Harvard lawyer."

Risinger said he was concerned that, like Gov. Rod Blagojevich, voters might choose Obama just because he comes across well on television and preaches a message of unity.

"I think people need to look at Barack Obama's record, rather than just what he has to say," Risinger said. "He's saying the stuff to bring America together and those kinds of things, but he has a liberal record, he has it in the (state) Senate. And to think that he'd be any different than that as a president would be wrong, no matter what he says."

Rudy Lewis, chairman of the Peoria County Republican Party, said Obama stays vague because he only wants to tell voters what they want to hear.

"It's putting your finger in the air and looking to see where he can get the most support," Lewis said.

Issues with which Obama does have a stated platform, such as his consistent opposition to the Iraq war and support of universal health care, are troubling, Lewis said.

"What would he have gone to war over? That's the type of person that kind of scares me," Lewis said. "A leader has to have some compassion, but they need to think with their head, not their heart."

As for universal health care, Lewis said that was "tried and failed in the Soviet Union."

U.S. Rep John Shimkus, R-Springfield, agreed that Obama was short on specifics during his address.

"He listed everything that folks have promised for years on presidential campaigns but never delivered," Shimkus said. But he added that a candidate doesn't have to give specifics in his announcement speech.

Obama "did a great job" Saturday, Shimkus said.

"He's very articulate, intelligent, good-looking," Shimkus said. "That's the Obama mystique."

Shimkus said Obama, with his grass-roots support, is the new Howard Dean — only Obama could be more successful than the failed 2004 presidential candidate.

"You look at the rollout of his campaign, (Obama) is really bucking the party powers," Shimkus said. "Dean tapped into this group of disaffected party activists looking for a new way, and if the Obama excitement moves in that direction, barring any major gaffe — which I wouldn't see from Sen. Obama — this (Democratic primary) could be down to the wire."

U.S. Rep. Ray LaHood, R-Peoria, was among the Republicans who gave Obama his due Saturday. LaHood, like Shimkus, said he backs U.S. Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., for president but noted that an Obama candidacy, if it is solidified in 2008, would be good for Illinois.

"I'm proud of the fact he's from Illinois. I call him a friend," LaHood said. "I think the conflict that I would have, and what I've told Republicans is, if he's at the top of the ticket, it's going to make it very difficult for Republicans in Illinois. Everybody's going to have to work hard."

LaHood said he called Obama earlier in the week to wish him well. "I wanted to let him know that I admire him."

An Obama presidential victory wouldn't be all bad — at least for Risinger, his former state senate colleague.

"I'd be able to call Barack by his first name and have pictures of me and him in the Senate together. And he happens to be president of the United States — that part of it's neat," he said.

"But that doesn't mean that I want him to be my president, either."