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Mike Pence rides a Harley in Iowa, presses for action on health care reform

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BOONE, Ia. – Yes, Vice President Mike Pence rode a Harley at U.S. Sen. Joni Ernst's Roast and Ride fundraiser here on Saturday. No, it wasn't for very long.

The vice president toiled around the Central Iowa Expo grounds for perhaps an eighth of a mile before dismounting to deliver a speech heavy on praise for President Donald Trump and aimed at convincing his fellow Republicans to deliver on promises to reform the nation's health care system.

Pence was the headliner for Ernst's third-annual political confab, which doubles as a fundraiser for her political committee and for a veterans nonprofit



Vice President Mike Pence rides a motorcycle in with Sen. Joni Ernst at her Roast and Ride Saturday, June 3, 2017, near Boone, Iowa. She rode into the expo center with over 300 motorcycle riders including the VP. (Photo: Rodney White/The Register)

and encompasses a lengthy, low-speed motorcycle ride as well as an afternoon of political speeches.

He didn't make the 49-mile ride to Boone from the Big Barn Harley-Davidson dealership in Des Moines, traveling instead on four wheels and safely ensconced in a long vice-presidential motorcade. His ride, on a borrowed Harley with Ernst riding just ahead, instead looped along a stretch of asphalt from the back of the stage to the front, making for a grand entrance with a lot less risk to the man a heartbeat away from the presidency.



Protesters line an intersection in Polk City, Iowa, as Sen. Joni Ernst's motorcycle ride goes by on the way to Boone Saturday, June 3, 2017. (Photo: Rodney White/The Register)

On stage, the vice president ticked through President Donald Trump's efforts since taking office on regulatory reform, defense spending,

confronting immigration and limiting funding for abortion. But he devoted the bulk of his remarks to pressing for action on the GOP health care reform law that passed the U.S. House this spring but has seen slower progress in the Senate.

“First and foremost, this summer, this Congress must come together and heed the president’s leadership and we must repeal and replace Obamacare,” Pence told a crowd about 1,400 on a hot, windswept field on the Central Iowa Expo grounds here.

To underscore the need for action, Pence picked out of the crowd Craig and Cindy Williams, a couple from Manning who were invited to meet the vice president when Air Force Two landed at the Des Moines airport on Saturday and then hitched a ride in the motorcade to Boone.

Craig recently published a letter to the editor in his hometown paper describing his experience with spiking insurance premiums and deductibles on a plan purchased on Obamacare exchange, leading to a call from Pence’s staff and the airport meeting.

The couple’s out-of-pocket costs, he said, have risen some 70 percent in less than two years, and now the policy is being canceled.

“Folks, that’s heartbreaking,” Pence told the crowd, calling the Williams’ experience an example of what the GOP bill aims to address by giving states more flexibility to roll back insurance benefit requirements and charge customers based on their health status.

“The Obamacare nightmare is about to end,” Pence said. “And it’s high time.”

(Pence’s exhortation comes as Republicans remain deeply divided over the particulars of health care reform and follows reports of Republican senators expressing doubt that a bill will advance this year.)

Pence also offered defense and praise for Trump’s major policy action of the last week: withdrawing from the Paris climate agreement that aims to limit carbon emissions worldwide over the coming decades.

The climate pact would lead to “slower” economic growth and “lower” wages, Pence argued.

“We stand with a president who chose to put American workers and American jobs first,” Pence said. “I want to submit to you by withdrawing from the Paris climate accord, President Donald Trump chose to put forgotten men and women of America first and he always will.”

The third-annual Roast and Ride was a more low-key affair than its previous iterations, when Ernst hosted then-candidate Trump amid the heat of the general election race last August and when the event drew seven GOP presidential candidates ahead of the Iowa caucuses two years ago.

The event attracted perhaps 1,400 attendees largely from the party's traditional, conservative base. Within that political universe, support for Trump and Pence runs strong despite months of bad headlines, scant legislative accomplishments and ongoing investigations into connections to Russia that have touched several top officials.

Several attendees said they've been heartened by the administration's actions since January and see any slow progress as the result of a concerted effort to undermine the president.

“I think everybody should leave him alone and let him do his job,” attendee Cori Brinker said of Trump. “I think he'd do a great job if he'd be left alone.”

Brinker, a 53-year-old nurse from Carroll drove to the roast with her daughter, Krystal Childress, while her husband and grandson participated in the motorcycle ride, said “liberals, Democrats and the media” are “nitpicking” Trump's performance out of frustration with the election results.

“They need to get over it, let it go, and let him do his job,” she said.

The Russia investigation wasn't mentioned from the stage, and among those in the crowd it rated as a distraction at best. Ray Gaessner, a farmer from Corning, suggested errors made by a new and inexperienced administration have been exaggerated for political effect by more entrenched political powers.

“When you drain the swamp,” he said, “the alligators don't like it.”

Prior to Pence's arrival and the politicking from the stage was the ride – a 49-mile trek along that departed Big Barn Harley just as the noon siren sounded in Saylor Township.

More than 500 motorcyclists massed at the dealership ahead of the ride, taking instructions on riding in a "staggered formation" and maintaining 2 seconds of separation from rider in front and 1 second of separation from rider to the side.

Before the bikers took off, Ernst announced from the back of a pickup truck that the proceeds from \$20-per-rider registration fee would benefit the nonprofit Hope for the Warriors, which supports post-9/11 service members, veterans and their families.

"God bless you all for being such great patriots," Ernst told the crowd. On the road, the three-mile-long line of motorcyclists passed over the "Mile Long Bridge" across Saylorville Lake, and wound through Polk City and Madrid en route to Boone.

In Polk City, 15 to 20 protesters stood alongside the street in a residential area holding signs highlighting issues ranging from the Paris climate agreement to universal health care.

— *Reporter Molly Longman contributed to this report.*