

JD Vance addresses Helene aid, immigration at NC town hall

BY LUCIANA PEREZ URIBE GUINASSI AND CAITLYN YAEDE, CORRESPONDENT
lperez@newsobserver.com

GREENSBORO

Republican vice presidential candidate JD Vance has been no stranger to North Carolina in the past few months.

And on Thursday, just 25 days from the election, Vance sat on an armchair across from moderator Danica Patrick — a former professional race car driver and Trump supporter — and took questions from the public during a town hall at the Koury Convention Center in Greensboro.

In a wide-ranging discussion, he addressed Hurricane Helene recovery, immigration and Social Security.

North Carolina is a battleground state and will play a pivotal role in determining who wins the presidential election this November. About 500 to 600 people were gathered at the convention center.

One person asked Vance whether he and former President Donald Trump promised “not to forget Western North Carolina” and, when a “legitimate conversation” could be had about “overhauling the process of disaster relief in the United States,” to cut bureaucratic red tape.

“We’re never going to let the people of that region of our country — the region really built our country,” Vance replied. “We’re never going to let them be left behind and forgotten.”

Vance is a U.S. senator from Ohio but before that, he was known for “Hillbilly Elegy,” a memoir where he writes about growing up in Appalachian Ohio.

“I think once we get past” the recovery phase, “then it’s time to focus on the disastrous federal response to this incredible crisis,” Vance said.

Trump has spread conspiracy theories on social media, including one that falsely claimed the Biden administration has used disaster relief funds for people in the country without legal authorization. And in Trump’s first trip to North Carolina since it was hit by Helene, he said the federal government’s response to the devastating storm had been “terrible.”

Over the past week, Trump and President Joe Biden’s teams have criticized each other’s past and current disaster relief efforts. The news release announcing Vance’s town hall said Vice President Kamala Harris, the Democratic nominee for president, “completely left North Carolinians behind in the wake of devastation post-Hurricane Helene.”

Federal, state and local responders have been working in Western North Carolina. And on Wednesday, state lawmakers passed a bill providing \$273 million for relief efforts. Legislative leaders have described this as a “first step.”

Robert McKenzie, who had traveled from Cumberland County to see Vance for the first time, said before the town hall that “all the things that Trump and Vance stand for are important to us.”

“Recovering from this last disaster — that is the most important thing for North Carolina,” he said.

As for relief efforts, he said: “The actual civilians in North Carolina are doing more than the government.”

QUESTIONS ON IMMIGRATION

Vance took a question asking for his and Trump’s plan to manage illegal immigration. Vance said they planned to deport people in the country without authorization who had committed crimes.

“The plan, to put it simply, is we gotta send them home. We gotta send them home ASAP,” he said.

Prior to Vance speaking, Republican National Committee Chairman Michael Whatley and U.S. Sen. Ted Budd of North Carolina gave brief remarks.

Vance also honed in on the fiscal impact of immigrants living in the United States without legal authorization and blamed undocumented individuals for the high cost of housing.

“The young generation in this country, they’re growing up in a nation where they’re going to become paupers in the country that their parents and their grandparents built,” Vance said. “The American dream of homeownership: not being deep in credit card debt, I want you to own a piece of the future and not just be a permanent debtor to people and institutions that don’t care about you.”

Home prices shot up during the pandemic and have remained high. Economists who spoke with Forbes said mortgage rates — which have been dropping recently — need to remain low and inventory needs to grow for prices to drop.

A woman asked Vance to clarify Trump and Vance’s plan for Social Security.

Trump “is going to protect Social Security and he is going to cut taxes on Social Security income,” Vance said. He then once more shifted to immigration, saying that “illegal aliens” would “bankrupt” the program.

Social Security benefits are for citizens with only some noncitizens, such as green card holders and refugees, allowed to access these benefits.

Vance criticized Harris’s response in a recent interview on ABC’s “The View,” where she said “not a thing” came to mind after being asked whether she would have done anything differently than Biden over the past four years.

VANCE’S LAST VISIT CAME SOON AFTER MARK ROBINSON SCANDAL

Vance is set to return to North Carolina Sunday with an appearance at the NASCAR race at the Charlotte Motor Speedway, the Charlotte Business Journal reported.

Before Thursday, he last visited North Carolina at a stop in Charlotte in late September. That visit came after CNN reported that North Carolina’s GOP gubernatorial candidate, Lt. Gov. Mark Robinson, allegedly made a series of sexually graphic, racist, homophobic and antisemitic posts on a pornographic message board about a decade ago.

In Charlotte, Vance was asked about the Trump campaign’s past support of Robinson. Vance said what Robinson “said or didn’t say is ultimately between him and the people of North Carolina,” The Charlotte Observer reported. Trump has previously endorsed Robinson.

Greensboro is Robinson’s hometown. Vance

did not mention Robinson on Thursday.

VOTER CONCERNS

Multiple people waiting to enter the Town Hall told The News & Observer they have Hurricane Helene at the top of their minds.

Penny Godfrey from Davidson County said Hurricane Helene had damaged two of her cars and her driveway, and a tree had fallen.

“That \$750 will sure help pay for that,” she said, referring to the \$750 that the Federal Emergency Management Agency makes available, and that does not need to be repaid, for disaster survivors to cover immediate costs like food and water. FEMA also provides up to \$42,500 for other needs.

Lisa Rancer, from Guilford County, said it’s “very important for money to be available for people in Western North Carolina to receive aid instead of giving that aid to illegal immigrants.”

“Having that FEMA money available for our own people,” she said.

Others were concerned about the economy. Brendan Sheet, who relocated from Fort Worth, Texas, to Winston-Salem, said it was his first campaign event.

“I would like to see prices level out to where we can afford to live and not be slaves to money. It’s like we work harder and have combined incomes, but are poorer than we’ve ever been,” he said.

Unemployment remains low in the United States. But the purchasing power of a dollar has dropped by 23% between September 2019 and September 2024.

Rachel Withers said she was “broke.” Withers was with her two daughters, who are homeschooled by Godfrey. She said this event was part of her daughter’s civic education.

“My paycheck is worth 40% less than it used to be. I make one-third more than I did in 2020. I had savings in 2020,” said Withers, who is from Mooresville.

“In 2024, I have

\$40,000 in credit card

debt,” she said, citing data

that shows that American

credit card debt is the

highest it’s ever been.

DEMOCRATS SPEAK ON TRUMP’S RECORD RESPONDING TO DISASTERS

Ahead of Vance’s visit, Democrats held a virtual press conference to “call out Trump’s record of denying disaster aid to North Carolina and playing politics with disaster relief,” and Trump, Vance and Robinson’s “extreme Project 2025 agenda to gut future disaster relief and preparation,” according to a news release sent out by Democrats.

Project 2025 is a political initiative created by conservative think tank the Heritage Foundation. Democrats have said Trump and the GOP are behind the plan, and many of Trump’s former staff reportedly helped create it, but Trump has denied involvement.

“As President, Donald Trump cut \$155 million from FEMA’s Disaster Relief Fund, and denied North Carolina over \$900 million in requested disaster aid after Hurricane Matthew struck our state,” said U.S. Rep. Kathy Manning, according to the news release.

The \$155 million number appears to be referring to the Trump administration’s intention to transfer \$155 million from FEMA’s Disaster Relief Fund to pay for transportation for adult migrants between detention centers and courtrooms.

As for the denied funds, the Trump administration initially denied most of a request for federal funds to respond to Hurricane Matthew in 2017, but later approved more aid.

Luciana Perez Uribe Guinassi:
@LucianaPerezUb

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