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April 18, 2009

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Thousands gather against stimulus aid at Bi-Lo Center tea party

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STAFF WRITERS

A passionate crowd of thousands filled the Bi-Lo Center plaza Friday to cheer, boo and chant on a variety of political issues during a rally for government fiscal responsibility hailed by Gov. Mark Sanford as a symbol of a growing movement.

The event echoed similar "tea party" rallies across the state and nation earlier in the week and was marked by waving flags and placards addressing everything from taxes to abortion to religion to gun control.

"It's important to harness this energy," Sanford said after speaking to an overwhelmingly supportive crowd. "They could change the entire debate in South Carolina overnight."

Meanwhile, on the other side of the arena, a smaller crowd estimated by Democratic officials at about 200 gathered for a "Save Our Schools" rally and a cry for Sanford to accept \$700 million of \$2.8 billion in stimulus money that he has said he won't accept unless it's used to pay down state debt.

"Tell him that we need that stimulus money," Greenville County school board member Leola Robinson-Simpson said at the event. "Fight for our schools. We're not going down without a fight."

At the larger rally, politicians of either stripe were ripe for jeers -- mostly reserved for Democratic President Barack Obama but also Republicans viewed by the crowd as not fiscally responsible, such as former president George W. Bush and current U.S. Congressman Gresham Barrett, who is running for governor.

At one point, Barrett -- who voted in favor of the bailout legislation passed last October -- was drowned out in boos as he stood before the crowd "to be held accountable" and defended what he said was a strong conservative voting record.

Following the rally, a Barrett spokesman, B.J. Boling said the boos came from "a vocal minority of the crowd" and that Barrett showed "character, courage and leadership."

The rally was highlighted by scores of signs -- "Don't Tax My Future," "Taxed Enough Already," "Hope Obama Fails," "What Would Reagan Do?" -- as well as mostly American flags along with other "Don't Tread On Me" flags.

Valerie Dickens came from Easley to attend the rally and said she was afraid that the money being spent to run the country now would negatively impact her 12-year-old daughter and 10-year-old son.

"My kids are going to be paying for years to come," Dickens said. "I'm worried about their future."