



Posted on Sun, Aug. 19, 2007

Only 3 S.C. lawmakers announce earmarks

Funding requests go unreported in spite of new transparency rule

By JAMES ROSEN

jrosen@mcclatchydc.com

WASHINGTON — Most of South Carolina's congressmen still refuse to make public their requests to fund pet projects out of the federal budget despite a promise by Washington Democrats to end such secrecy.

These funding requests — called earmarks — can be found with a little work. Yet, the vast majority of representatives and senators in Washington still refuse to publicize earmark requests.

Among the seven members of South Carolina's congressional delegation who seek earmarks (U.S. Sen. Jim DeMint does not), only Democratic Rep. John Spratt and Republican Reps. Joe Wilson and Bob Inglis have revealed their requests.

"I think it's best to be transparent about the (earmark) requests," Inglis said in an interview. "Appropriations requests are part of the constitutional process Congress is charged with fulfilling."

To date, there are 117 earmarks that would funnel \$195.7 million to South Carolina in spending bills before Congress. All but a handful are from the S.C. delegation.

House Majority Whip James Clyburn, D-S.C., is using his clout to obtain funding for 34 earmarks worth \$45.4 million, more than the state's other five House members combined.

Clyburn's earmarks range from \$10.5 million he is seeking to boost the number of minority students who pursue science and technology careers to \$87,000 he wants for a preschool program in the Williamsburg County town of Kingstree.

U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham's earmark requests were second to Clyburn's, totaling \$33 million covering 26 projects.

Graham declined to reveal his earmark requests. They include \$5 million for the National Advocacy Center, on the USC campus, that trains federal prosecutors and \$1.6 million for textile research at Clemson University.

"Senator Graham is proud to support these important projects for the future of South Carolina," said his spokesman, Kevin Bishop. "They are worthwhile and stand on their own merit."

Chuck Fant, a Spratt spokesman, said of the House Budget Committee chairman's 60 earmark bids:

"Each year we give these projects a top to bottom review. Each one is a plus for South Carolina and worthy of funding. There's no fat here."

Wilson posted his requests online in response to a CNN survey in June. Inglis and Spratt disclosed their requests when asked to do so last week by McClatchy Newspapers. Republican Reps. Henry Brown and Gresham Barrett declined to reveal their earmark bids.

"All project-specific funding received through the federal appropriations process is a matter of public record, and I have always supported the practice of identifying their sponsors," Brown said.

"Requests for funding that do not become part of approved legislation, however, remain confidential out of respect for the privacy of those making such requests," he said.

WHY SECRECY LINGERS

For his congressional peers who don't reveal their earmark requests, Inglis has a simple question:

"If you thought well enough of a project to ask money for it, then why not disclose what you were asking for?"

Capitol Hill aides and outside experts gave different answers to that question:

- Only a quarter or fewer of the earmark requests are funded, so lawmakers fear that constituents will view them as ineffective if they disclose their lists.

- Competing interests back home — local governments, hospitals, colleges, nonprofit groups — would be jealous of others' requests and angry if their own bids were cut or not advanced at all.

Steve Ellis, vice president of Taxpayers for Common Sense, a fiscally conservative think tank in Washington, offered a more complex and nefarious explanation of lawmakers' reticence on earmark disclosure.

Ellis and congressional aides described a deceptive chain of false hope and misrepresentation that ensnares the local interests, the lobbyists they hire to push their projects in Washington and the lawmakers themselves.

In this account, the lobbyists need to show their clients that they are delivering on their big salaries, so they give lawmakers long lists of earmark requests.

The lawmakers don't want to be seen as turning their backs on constituents, so they promise lobbyists to pursue all or most of the earmarks.

The senators and representatives then give appropriators numerous earmark requests, including many they know won't be approved — and some they know aren't worthy of funding.

Capital Hill staffers familiar with the Byzantine process cited cases in which lawmakers submitted earmark requests, then told appropriators in private not to fund them.

DeMint believes that these kinds of duplicitous webs are the cause of most corruption in Congress. Earmarks, he says, drive up spending, occupy far too much of lawmakers' time and put parochial desires over the national good.

DEMINT VS. EARMARKS

In the Senate, DeMint is among a handful of senators who don't seek any earmarks.

In the Upstate senator's view, federal money should be distributed either in large block grants to the states or via competitive grants that enable executive agency heads to compare different projects' worth and make merit-based decisions.

"We (lawmakers) don't have the expertise to direct money toward certain housing projects, certain sewer plants, certain roads and bridges," DeMint said.

For that reason, DeMint blocked a massive spending bill late last year. He infuriated Republican and Democratic congressional leaders alike, but his protest forced them to strip out thousands of earmarks.

When Congress passed earmark reforms as part of ethics legislation Aug. 2, DeMint branded them "a complete sham." He said they contain loopholes such as allowing House and Senate leaders or the powerful appropriations subcommittee chairman to decide whether earmarks have been adequately disclosed.

DeMint's criticism angered Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, who said: "Under the Republicans, not one (earmark) was disclosed — not one."

In addition to eliminating free trips and other gifts from lobbyists, the ethics bill requires increased disclosure of earmarks. Lawmakers must submit signed funding requests to the appropriators; for the first time, earmarks included in the spending measures must identify their sponsors.

Ellis, of Taxpayers for Common Sense, said earmark disclosure in the current appropriations bills has improved — but is still murky.

The projects, the funding amounts and the sponsors are often not all together, Ellis said, with key pieces of information scattered among different parts of the lengthy bills or the committee reports that accompany them.

Ellis said he and his staff spend weeks combing through the bills and reports in an attempt to make sense of the earmarks.

"They've been able to meet the letter of their transparency rule and, at the same time, violate the spirit of it," Ellis said. "We've certainly learned that they can hide a lot of information in plain sight just by making it difficult to connect the dots."

Rosen covers Washington for McClatchy Newspapers in South Carolina.

S.C. EARMARKS

At least 117 earmarks target a total of \$195.7 million to South Carolina in spending bills before Congress.* Below are the S.C. delegations.

nRep. Jim Clyburn, D-Columbia: 34 projects, total \$45.4 million

nSen. Lindsey Graham, R-Seneca: 26 projects, total \$33 million
nRep. John Spratt, D-York: 19 projects, total \$15.5 million
nRep. Henry Brown, R-Hanahan: 10 projects, total \$8.9 million
nRep. Bob Inglis, R-Travelers Rest: 8 projects, total \$8.1 million
nRep. Joe Wilson, R-Lexington: 10 projects, total \$7.6 million
nRep. Gresham Barrett, R-Westminster: 8 projects, total \$4.4 million
nSen. Jim DeMint, R-Greenville: 0 projects, \$0

Clyburn is king

Thanks to the Democrats control of Congress and his post as House majority whip, Rep. Jim Clyburn has earmarked more money for South Carolina than the state delegations other five House members combined.

Earmarks down

New House and Senate rules requiring identification of earmark sponsors and other transparency measures have cut the total significantly from 15,268 in 2005 and more than 13,000 last year. Nationally, there are 8,939 earmarks designating \$32.8 billion in discretionary spending for projects across the country.

* Some of the S.C. earmarks are sponsored by groups of lawmakers from other states who are dividing regional pots of money.

SOURCES: U.S. House of Representatives.; Taxpayers for Common Sense