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Article published Feb 5, 2008

## Earmarking reform

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By Mike Pence - Airplane pilots know that when you're flying a plane and the gauges start telling you something is wrong, the first thing you do is put the airplane on the ground, check out the engine and figure out what's wrong.

After years of excess spending and outright corruption, the gauges of federal spending in Washington are telling the American people something is very wrong, especially when it comes to earmarks. It is time to land the plane and fix the engine. It is time for an earmark moratorium followed by fundamental reform.

Earmarking occurs when a member of Congress requests funding for specific projects in their districts and states. Such spending is as old as the republic itself. Under the Constitution, Congress has the authority to spend the peoples' money in ways both large and small. I have requested earmarked spending every year that I have been in office.

However, directing spending in the form of earmarks must be done wisely, openly and fairly. Earmarking in recent years has not met the high standard the American people demand. The federal budget system, including earmarking, is broken. Earmarking came of age under Republican control of Congress with thousands of projects being added to bills that had never included such spending. Public concern over spending was a major factor in the defeat of the Republican majority in 2006.

Despite promises of reform from Democrats when they won the Congressional majority, earmarking continues to spiral out of control. Last year's Omnibus spending bill was more than 3,400 pages long, and it wasn't filed until after midnight on the very day the vote was held. Members did not have time to review it. If they had, they would have found that it contained wasteful earmark spending ranging from funding fruit fly research to building swimming pools to providing for wine and culinary centers. Most egregious, they would have found that nearly 300 unexamined earmarks costing more than \$800 million were dropped in at the last minute, in the middle of the night, immune to public debate or scrutiny until after the fact.

All spending bills passed in 2007 included some 11,000 earmarks. Those earmarks totaled more than \$14 billion in cost, and included wasteful spending for items such as a \$20 million ferry in Alaska to connect Anchorage with Port MacKenzie — benefiting just 40 people who work in Port MacKenzie. That, of course, followed the infamous Bridge to Nowhere earmark from the 2005 highway bill. The current system of earmarking allows this waste to continue. It allows earmarks to be requested for projects hundreds of miles away from the districts that the requesting member represents, and it has led to earmarks being tied to public

scandals and outright corruption.

I have been an advocate for earmark reform for years and have led efforts by House conservatives to enact budget process reforms under Republican majorities. I have also supported bipartisan efforts to enact further earmark reforms under Democratic control. And I have led by example. I have never traded my vote for a funding request. One year ago, my office was among the first in Congress to post all of my appropriations requests on my Web site. I have made every effort to press for reform within the system, but I have come to the conclusion that Congress must take dramatic action to restore public confidence in the federal budget process.

After seeing House Democrats return to "earmarks as usual," including hundreds of unexamined earmarks in recent spending bills, I believe that the time for an earmark moratorium has arrived. And House Republicans have risen to the challenge. Recently, Republicans in Congress took a significant step toward earmark reform by challenging House Democrats to join them in a "time-out" on earmarking. Republicans united behind a challenge for an earmark moratorium and called for the establishment of a new select committee that would conduct public hearings and make recommendations that will change the way that Congress spends the people's money forever. By challenging House Democrats to join in a bipartisan effort ending the current practice of earmarking in Washington, House Republicans have thrown down the gauntlet of reform.

Should Democrats refuse this bipartisan challenge, choosing to defend the current system for earmark spending, they will have dismissed the heartfelt concern of millions of Americans who long to see integrity restored in the national legislature. If Democrats refuse to join us in the cause of reform, Republicans will continue to press for an earmark moratorium and fundamental reform. Nothing short of a full moratorium followed by a public vetting of the current system will restore public confidence in our federal budget.

America wants Congress to land the plane, embrace a moratorium on earmarks and fix this broken system. Republicans are leading this fight for fiscal discipline and reform. For the sake of the nation, I sincerely hope our Democrat colleagues will soon follow.

*Rep. Mike Pence of Indiana, former chairman of the House Republican Study Committee, currently serves as the ranking Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Committee's Middle East Subcommittee.*