

To win, you have to play

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The neutral term is "earmarks."

That's the practice of congressional members targeting money for projects back home.

Critics call it "pork."

But, as any politician can tell you, it's called pork only when someone else is on the receiving end. When the money comes home, constituents are grateful.

Rep. Rodney Alexander, R-Quitman, and Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., received specific citation by Taxpayers for Common Sense for their roles in delivering \$295 million in federal funding for special projects last year, or \$68.79 for every man, woman and child.

That pales in comparison to Sen. Robert Byrd, D-W. Va., who was awarded the organization's Pantheon of Pork Award for arranging \$386 million in projects.

Still, Louisiana's number is significant. So are our needs.

The need for continued federal assis-

tance to recover from hurricanes, for one, helped to inflate the money requested by the state's lawmakers. Hurricane Katrina was the single most costly national disaster to hit this nation. An increase in federal funding should surprise no one.

Critics say the practice rewards politics over merit and is subject to abuse. They point to past scandals, such as the one involving Rep. Randy "Duke" Cunningham, R-Calif., who took bribes to insert earmarks into legislation.

Taxpayers for Common Sense identifies \$29 billion in such projects in its 2006 Congressional Pig Book.

These "pork" projects are often approved without committee hearings, hidden inside bulging appropriations bills and serving only a local or special interest.

Alexander, in fact, is withholding his most recent list of requests, saying publicity might jeopardize the chances for funding. He makes no apology.

"If Washington is going to spend our money, and I don't do what I can to

bring it to Louisiana, then I'm not doing my job," he says.

We agree.

While we don't endorse secrecy in government, Alexander's position is strategic. And as long as the practice is permitted, not pursuing a fair share of the federal money would be negligent. That's how the game is played, and Louisiana's elected leaders have to be on the field.

Over the years, Louisiana has paid more into the federal coffers than it has received. Among the projects pushed by Alexander are a new Monroe Regional Airport terminal and the Greater Ouachita Port. The new terminal is long overdue for the continuation of meaningful service. The port promises more jobs.

Local? Definitely.

Wasteful? Hardly.

We applaud Alexander's and Landrieu's work to bring federal funds home to help with legitimate infrastructure needs that otherwise could never be met.