

Clyburn earmarks tied to family

Watchdog group critical of biggest S.C. spender

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U.S. Rep. James Clyburn, criticized in the past for using tax dollars to fund pet projects, has set aside at least \$6.2 million in federal budgets this decade for projects that could directly benefit his friends and family members, an analysis by The Sun News shows.

The budget appropriations, known as earmarks, include taxpayer dollars for a museum his nephew is helping to design, a community center that runs a program employing his sister-in-law and money for a Columbia wellness center that employs his daughter.

A taxpayer watchdog group says the earmarks are such blatant examples of patronage that the House Ethics Committee should investigate them.

Clyburn and his staff did not respond to requests for comments on the earmarks last week. Clyburn told The Sun News in a 2006 interview that there is nothing wrong with setting aside federal tax dollars for projects that could benefit his family.

"I have a bushel of family members," Clyburn said. "I earmark stuff for the state of South Carolina, and my daughter works for the state. I earmark stuff for Sumter, and several of my nieces and nephews work for Sumter. I've earmarked millions of dollars for I-73. Should I not do that because my son is an engineer with the highway department?"

Clyburn, who holds the powerful House majority whip position, is the sole sponsor for 32 earmarks in the current federal budget, totaling \$38.8 million.

That almost matches the \$45.5 million in solo-sponsored earmarks by all of the other S.C. legislators combined.

Clyburn ranks No. 51 among 435 U.S. representatives for the dollar amount of earmarks sponsored - both solo and jointly - in this year's budget.

The watchdog group Citizens Against Government Waste gives Clyburn its second-lowest score and calls him "hostile" toward taxpayers because of what is termed an extravagant use of public money.

"Mr. Clyburn is notorious for questionable earmarks," said Leslie Paige, spokeswoman for Citizens Against Government Waste.

"There doesn't seem to be such a thing as shame in Congress anymore," she said. "The institution as a whole has gone beyond the reach of any taxpayer oversight."

Clyburn has drawn headlines for past earmarks.

Citizens Against Government Waste - a nonprofit, nonpartisan group which aims to eliminate waste and mismanagement in the federal government - named Clyburn as Porker of the Month in November because he inserted a \$3 million earmark into a military spending bill for the First Tee nonprofit agency. First Tee operates a program at a Columbia golf course named after the congressman.

The earmark was unnecessary, critics said, because the agency - which aims to promote character development through the game of golf - already gets millions of dollars in support from Fortune 500 companies.

Clyburn called the criticism "a little bit insulting" during a speech on the House floor and said all of the money would be used for First Tee programs benefiting military families.

Clyburn called his opponents hypocritical and intolerant when he was criticized in 2003 for getting \$3.3 million in federal funds for a pedestrian crosswalk - named after him - that allows for easier access to a disadvantaged neighborhood in Columbia.

"These efforts - and others of which I am proud - save lives, protect health, improve communities and enhance economic opportunities," Clyburn said at the time.

Paige said that response is typical whenever earmarks are questioned.

"We're told by members of Congress that we should just trust them because they know what is best for their districts and what their constituents need," she said. "But what they are really doing is funneling money to cronies and family members."

Family connections

There are at least four earmarks in this year's budget that could directly benefit Clyburn's friends and family members.

The largest earmark is \$784,000 for the planning and design of the International African American Museum in Charleston. Clyburn's nephew, Derrick Ballard, is one of the lead architects on that project.

This is the second time Clyburn has appropriated money for a project in which Ballard was to be an architect.

Clyburn in 2005 earmarked \$145,500 for a community center that was supposed to be built by Five Rivers Community Development Corp., a Georgetown nonprofit agency whose executives now are facing 15 felony charges that they stole public money.

The community center, to be designed by Ballard, never was built.

Clyburn dismissed criticism of the Five Rivers earmark in a newspaper interview this year, saying "there was no substance to it, but a lot of headlines."

Clyburn said he did not know his nephew was involved in either the Five Rivers or museum projects when he earmarked the money.

Clyburn also set aside \$229,000 in this year's budget for an obesity program at the Charles R. Drew Wellness Center in Columbia, where his daughter, Angela, is the marketing and membership director.

Clyburn also earmarked \$990,000 for construction of the city-owned wellness center in 2003.

Clyburn appropriated \$282,000 this year for the South Sumter Resource Center in Sumter, an umbrella group that offers housing and at-risk youth programs.

Clyburn's sister-in-law, Gwendolyn Clyburn, is housing coordinator for the Sumter County Community Development Corp., which is part of the center.

His brother, Charles Clyburn, previously was a trainer for the center's YouthBuild program.

This year's earmark is in addition to \$670,000 that Clyburn appropriated for the resource center between 2001 and 2007.

Benefiting others

Clyburn has earmarked money for at least one project in another state that benefited a family member.

In 2005, he earmarked \$2.5 million for an airport terminal expansion in Augusta, Ga.

William Clyburn Jr., the congressman's cousin, was the chief lobbyist for the airport project and received \$60,000 from consulting firms after the federal dollars were in hand.

William Clyburn initially said he asked his cousin to include the earmark in that year's budget bill, but he reversed that statement two months later when a spokesman for James Clyburn disputed the lobbyist's remarks, according to newspaper accounts.

Clyburn also earmarks tax dollars for projects that benefit his friends and business associates, documents show.

For example, he set aside \$131,000 this year for College Summit, a nonprofit that aims to help low-income students succeed in college.

That earmark does not show up in the S.C. database because the nonprofit is located in Washington, D.C.

Jaime Harrison, who serves on that nonprofit's board of directors, was a top aide to Clyburn and executive director of the House Democratic Caucus in 2006.

This is the second year that Clyburn has earmarked money for College Summit, setting aside \$250,000 in 2007.

Clyburn previously appropriated a combined \$1.3 million in 2003 and 2004 for a transportation center for Horry County's mass-transit agency, which used to go by the name Lymo.

At the time of the earmarks, Clyburn was in a real estate business venture with Lymo's executive director, Benedict Shogaolu.

Shogaolu was convicted in 2006 of four felony charges of public corruption related to his work at Lymo.

Other S.C. lawmakers

Most of the earmarks sponsored this year by other S.C. legislators went to community-oriented police programs, the military, public works projects such as roads and water treatment plants, university research programs and harbor and waterway dredging.

Sen. Lindsey Graham tucked \$188,000 into the budget for the University of South Carolina's law school, his alma mater, and Rep. Henry Brown gave the S.C. Aquarium in Charleston \$146,000 for exhibits and educational programs.

Kevin Bishop, a spokesman for Graham, said there can be a fine line when it comes to earmarks and the appearance of a conflict of interest.

"Senator Graham is a graduate of the University of South Carolina, he has friends there and he has met with [university] President [Andrew A.] Sorensen on many occasions," Bishop said.

That doesn't mean Graham should not earmark money for the school, Bishop said.

Brown, a Republican in the 1st Congressional District, said he "evaluates each project based upon its individual merits, its impact on the quality of life and economy of the 1st District and expected benefits to the nation" when he sponsors earmarks.

"I make every effort to ensure that they do not have a direct and foreseeable effect on the financial interests of me or my spouse," Brown said. "I further agree to place a statement in the Congressional Record describing how the funds will be spent and justifying the use of federal taxpayer funds."

Spending, consequences

Clyburn by far outspends his S.C. colleagues with solo appropriations - those most likely to include questionable spending, critics say, because they are inserted into the budget without discussion by other lawmakers.

News releases posted on Clyburn's Web site show he has sponsored about \$210 million in earmarks since fiscal 2003.

Even so, Clyburn pales in comparison to some other congressional big spenders. Sen. Thad Cochran, R-Miss., led the way this year with \$773.6 million in earmarks, followed by perennial front-runner Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, with \$501.9 million in earmarks.

All told, pork-barrel spending topped 11,612 projects costing \$17.2 billion in this year's budget.

Clyburn also is not alone in earmarking tax dollars for projects that benefit friends and relatives.

A USA Today study showed \$750 million in earmarks in 2005 went to projects pitched by lobbyists whose relatives were in Congress. Clyburn was among the lawmakers cited in that report.

"This is becoming a very disturbing theme in Congress, with more of these stories coming to light all the time," Paige said. "Until someone demands a more accountable system, this is what we're going to get."

Legislation proposed last year in the House would have made it illegal to earmark money for any endeavor that benefits a legislator's family.

"That got watered down to where the rule now says it's OK to give earmarks to projects that benefit a family member as long as the project benefits others as well," Paige said.

Sen. Jim DeMint, R-S.C., one of 18 lawmakers with no earmarks in this year's budget, is trying to reform the system.

He introduced a motion this year that would have put a one-year moratorium on earmarks so Congress could reform the process. The proposal was defeated by a nearly 3-to-1 vote.

DeMint did succeed in pushing legislation that requires lawmakers to sign their names to earmarks they sponsor. Previously, an earmark's sponsor was kept secret unless the lawmaker decided to go public.

Graham and other S.C. legislators say there must be more transparency in the earmark process.

"Elected officials should be able to designate money for their states and districts, but every elected official should have to defend their actions and the merits of the program," Graham said in a statement. "Taxpayers deserve to know where their funds are going."

U.S. Rep. John Spratt, a Democrat in the 5th District, said the earmark process has been "plagued by scandal" and is in need of reform but not abandonment. "The earmark process, when not abused, is a way to distribute money into areas that have specific funding needs which would otherwise go unmet," Spratt said. "The earmarks I have requested better my district and do not reflect lobbying interests."

DeMint, however, continues to be one of the few legislators taking a hard line against what critics commonly refer to as Congress' "favor factory."

"The earmark process allows politicians to fund pet projects based on political power instead of merit," DeMint said in a news release earlier this year.

"Earmarks are rarely subject to public hearings or oversight," he said, "and they invite the kind of corruption that has sent lawmakers to jail."