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DeMint says no to earmarks

S.C. senator pledges not to request any special funds in appropriations bill

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EARMARKS IN S.C

None of the 2008 requests for special project funding have been made public yet. Two of South Carolina's congressmen listed projects they are seeking money for.

Rep. Bob Inglis

- International Center for Automotive Research, Clemson University, with a focus on developing hydrogen cars
- Upstate Regional Robotics Training Center, Union County, to retrain textile workers and others in skills for high-tech jobs

Rep. James Clyburn

- Infrastructure development for the Lake Marion Regional Water Authority
- Expansion of the South Carolina National Heritage Corridor to promote economic development and tourism in 14 counties from the foothills of Oconee County, along the Savannah River and through the Edisto River Basin, to Charleston

WASHINGTON — U.S. Sen. Jim DeMint has made combating earmarks his signature issue, drawing national attention for his efforts to end lawmakers' often anonymous funding for pet projects.

Now, the Greenville Republican is taking the radical step of pledging not to seek any earmarks — even those that would benefit South Carolina — in the fiscal 2008 appropriations bills.

"I'm not requesting earmarks," DeMint said in an interview. "We try to help our state pursue applications for merit-based (federal) grants, which is the way I think money should be distributed."

None of the other seven members of the S.C. congressional delegation, including five fellow Republicans, are following DeMint's lead.

"I'm the only one in Washington representing specifically Spartanburg County, Greenville County, Union County and a little bit of Laurens County, so I intend to present (funding) opportunities to a collection of decision-makers here in Washington," said U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis, a Travelers Rest Republican.

U.S. Rep. David Obey, a Wisconsin Democrat and chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, set Friday as the deadline for House members to submit earmark requests. There is no single deadline in the Senate, with heads of the 12 appropriations subcommittees following their own procedures.

"We agree philosophically with Senator DeMint," said Kevin Bishop, spokesman for U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, a Seneca Republican. "But as long as earmarks are done in a transparent manner, go through the legislative process and stand on their own merits, Sen. Graham does think the legislature has a role in spending money."

U.S. Rep. Jim Clyburn, House majority whip and a Columbia Democrat, doesn't share DeMint's philosophical aversion to earmarks, as long as they are obtained openly.

"Eliminating earmarks will do nothing to stop those intent on illegally manipulating the process," he said. "It would, however, shift the entire process of determining funding priorities from us and our constituents to out-of-state, faceless bureaucrats, highly paid grant writers and well-connected lobbyists."

DeMint thought he had achieved a major victory in January when he helped compel the Senate to include in an ethics bill provisions requiring full transparency and advance Internet notice for earmark requests.

But the House has not passed matching legislation, though it adopted internal rules on earmark reforms. The Senate has failed to adopt such rules for its appropriations bills, rejecting two DeMint proposals to do so in the last month.

That leaves Congress, in DeMint's view, with no clear, consistent way to handle spending earmarks.

So he is wiping his hands of them in protest.

Not only is DeMint alone in the state's congressional delegation in rejecting earmarks, he's virtually alone in Congress, joined by only a few fellow fiscal hawks: U.S. Sens. Tom Coburn, an Oklahoma Republican, and Claire McCaskill, a newly elected Missouri Democrat; and in the House, U.S. Reps. John Boehner of Ohio and Jeff Flake of Arizona, both Republicans.

DeMint believes new Democratic congressional leaders, especially in the Senate, are backsliding on their campaign pledges to reverse the escalating number of earmarks.

The Greenville Republican views earmarks as the root of the corruption scandals that sent lobbyist Jack Abramoff and U.S. Rep. Randy "Duke" Cunningham to prison, forced U.S. Rep. Bob Ney to resign and ensnared other lawmakers in legal battles.

"The investigations in the House are all related to trading earmarks for some type of payment or benefit to a congressman," DeMint said.

"Almost every little college or municipality or county feels forced to hire a lobbyist at \$5,000 or \$10,000 a month to get an earmark from us," he said. "If we can't see the corrupting nature of that, then we're too blind to lead the country."

DeMint, a former market research firm owner, has been a fiscal hawk since joining the House in 1999 and rising to the Senate in 2005. But he has not sought to eliminate earmarks, pushing instead to prohibit lawmakers from securing them anonymously and at the last minute behind closed doors.

As recently as December 2005, DeMint assured constituents: "As long as there are earmarks, we'll be fighting for the state's share."

Working with other delegation members, DeMint helped secure money for the Savannah River Site and for highway projects such as widening a dangerous stretch of U.S. 17 in the Lowcountry and building I-73 from Michigan to South Carolina.

Now, beyond not seeking his own earmarks, DeMint is prepared to block those he deems objectionable, even if they pay for projects in South Carolina.

"If something comes up on the floor, he may move to strike wasteful spending whether it's for South Carolina or somewhere else in the nation," said Wesley Denton, DeMint's spokesman. "He'll treat it the same. He thinks South Carolinians and all Americans want to make sure that their tax dollars are spent wisely."

DeMint also believes, Denton added, that South Carolina would fare better in the struggle for federal money if it depended on projects' merits rather than lawmakers' political pull.

DeMint's stand against earmarks has earned him praise from pundits ranging from Washington Post editorialists to conservative analysts.

"I applaud Senator DeMint for putting his money where his mouth is and doing his part to stop a very corrupt system," said Brian Riedle, a federal budget expert at the Heritage Institute in Washington.

Richard Kogan, an analyst with the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, said DeMint is protesting a core element of U.S. representative democracy.

"Asking members of Congress to ignore the wishes of their own constituents is like asking parents not to smile at their own children," Kogan said.

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