

Money harder to come by as some local officials abandon earmark system After Earmarks

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Standing beside Republican Sen. Jim DeMint in the atrium of the Charleston International Airport, Charleston County Aviation Authority Chairman David Jennings fights a war of words in describing the nearly \$30 million in local money that's needed for an expansion of the airport's secondary runway.

"We'd rather 'procure,' than 'scrounge,'" Jennings says. The total cost for the project is \$59 million, with half expected to come from the Federal Aviation Administration.

The procuring went a lot easier in 2002. Sen. Fritz Hollings, a Charleston Democrat and DeMint's predecessor, surprised airport officials with \$20 million in federal highway money earmarked for the airport's ambitious parking deck.

Bob Probst, the finance director of the state's Department of Transportation, said at the time that earmarks had become the way to do business in Washington.

"Our preference would be receiving allocations in general, but we've worked with our delegation in Congress on earmarking projects of high priority to DOT," he told the Associated Press.

DeMint's relentless push against earmarks has lit a fire under fiscal conservatives combating the perception that earmarks are business as usual. Hints of revolt exist among Republicans, and the long journey to a more equitable way of doling out federal aid could put South Carolina at a disadvantage, with other legislators pressing for special monies as DeMint and others stand empty-handed — except for their principles.

The kind of allocations Probst preferred, with general allocations provided to agencies who then decide how to spend the money, is just the type of thing that DeMint and Sen. Lindsey Graham have been advocating for years. In fact, DeMint is now banking on just such a system of fair-minded, merit-based evaluation from the FAA to pull the other \$30 million needed for the airport's runway expansion plans.

"This is an example of trying to let the federal government work like it's supposed to," DeMint says. "If we're not tying up all the money they have on earmarks, then it will be done on criteria and merit. This is a high-value airport, and I don't want that money to go to Alaska or West Virginia."

Alaska and West Virginia receive particular mention because, in earmark funding, both outpace South Carolina. Even though West Virginia is less than half our size and Alaska's

population is about 16 percent of South Carolina's, both rank in the top 10 for total Congressional earmarks in the 2008 appropriations bills. South Carolina is at 34.

Dramatic stands against earmarks are laudable, but they come at a price. Rep. Joe Wilson, a Lexington Republican whose district stretches south of Charleston to Beaufort County, told constituents last week that he would not seek an earmark of \$3.2 million for an expansion of the Beaufort National Cemetery because of his recent pledge to make no earmark requests for the next year.

"My decision was not a reflection of the value of the many important requests I have received, but rather a response to a wasteful system that does not reward merit and which puts well-deserving projects at a disadvantage," Wilson said in a statement to The Beaufort Gazette, noting he'll continue to seek other means of finding the money.

But Jimmie Leach, the retired brigadier general who leads the Veterans Cemetery Committee of Beaufort, doesn't understand why his well-deserving project is being slighted by his congressman.

"This (request) is far from being pork-barrel (politics)," Leach told the Gazette. "It's not a beneficiary to Beaufort or the state of South Carolina — that was not the purpose. It was to take care of all veterans, wherever they are, if they can come here and get buried."

South Carolina's role in the earmark debate blossomed in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. With an evident need for massive federal support to repair the gulf communities impacted, DeMint and Graham announced they would roll back earmarks for high-priority South Carolina projects if other legislators would do the same — paying particular attention to a recently funded "Bridge to Nowhere" in Alaska, a \$250 million bridge that would be expected to service about 50 people. While the threat was mostly hollow, South Carolina's senators continue to press their argument that projects like the Alaskan bridge get undue priority through the earmark process.

The problem is that voters are incensed about a "Bridge to Nowhere" until it's a bridge in their district. Last fall, Charleston Congressman Henry Brown sent a questionnaire to voters that suggested he was having an internal debate on how to approach earmarks.

"I have worked hard to secure funds for projects such as the new Cooper River Bridge, I-73, veterans hospitals and outpatient clinics, beach renourishment, stormwater projects, etc. During the last year, however, the national news media has questioned projects such as these and whether or not members of Congress should try to secure needed funds for specific projects in their home districts," he wrote, before asking voters whether he should continue fighting for those dollars or "let federal agencies administer all funds as they wish." More than 90 percent told Brown to keep fighting for special money for local projects.

"They don't sense that those items we're spending are pork," he told The Post and Courier. "It gave me a good feeling to know that they trust me more than they trust these agencies ... I know my district better than most bureaucrats."

And it would appear that Brown is not alone. As the Senate was debating federal budget measures earlier this month, DeMint's effort to institute a one-year moratorium on earmarks received the support of all three presidential candidates, but only mustered 29 votes — less than half those he'd need to get the measure passed. It's not hard to see where the line is drawn. The bipartisan group of 15 co-sponsors all hailed from states in the bottom half of per capita earmark allocations in 2008.

There has been at least one victory. Last year, DeMint and others successfully pushed through a measure requiring that sponsors be identified with earmarks. The new sunlight provided at least one bit of presidential campaign fodder — with Sen. John McCain and others criticizing Sen. Hillary Clinton's support for a Woodstock museum.

But after last week's defeat, DeMint has retreated to wage the battle against earmarks first in the Republican caucus, which makes up a narrow minority in the Senate. GOP leader Mitch McConnell is expected to seek out a consensus among Republicans regarding earmarks, and DeMint hopes that will lead to broader reforms across the Senate.

"It's not going to be the moratorium that I'd hoped for, but it will provide more transparency and limit the ability to add earmarks without a vote in the conference," DeMint says.

Meanwhile, DeMint will work to coordinate funding for projects like the Charleston airport runway lengthening through other avenues. But anyone that's been in a bank line will tell you, it's rarely the case that when one teller window closes, another one opens.