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## STRAND'S SLICE OF FEDERAL FUNDS GROWS

David Wren The Sun News

More federal dollars have found their way to the Grand Strand in recent years, a reflection of this area's population growth, more forward-looking development plans, intensive lobbying by local leaders and tourism's increasing economic clout in the Palmetto State.

The increases are showing up in several ways:

Grants and other funding tied to demographic formulas, such as population increases

Federal earmarks, better known as pork, that are inserted into the annual budget without Congressional debate to fund lawmakers' pet projects.

While taxpayer groups decry the rise in pork-barrel spending, local business leaders say it would be foolish not to work within the existing system to ensure this area gets its fair share of that money.

Special federal agency appropriations to help pay for big-ticket projects, such as Interstate 73 and a new terminal at Myrtle Beach International Airport terminal.

``More and more, there is a growing recognition from legislators that the Grand Strand is a cash cow for the rest of the state," said Brad Dean, president of the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce. ``If this cash cow is going to continue to feed South Carolina, we need to feed the cash cow as well."

U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., has used the cash cow analogy in recent speeches through the state, including one this summer in Myrtle Beach.

Graham said this area is getting more attention because Grand Strand leaders no longer look for quick fixes or shortsighted planning but are working regionally for long-term infrastructure improvements.

``People have come up with a different vision of taking Myrtle Beach to the next level," Graham said. ``There is a plan to invest in things beyond just widening roads for short-term growth. There is now a plan to create a new economy, and the delegation sees that as something that's worth investing in."

Graham said that plan includes better road access with Interstate 73, a new airport terminal to expand tourism beyond the Southeast region and an international trade center to lure new types of businesses to the Grand Strand.

Legislators have worked to find money for all of those projects. President Bush signed a bill in August 2005 authorizing \$81 million for S.C.'s portion of I-73, the first interstate to the Grand Strand.

The Federal Aviation Administration has agreed to pay \$43 million toward a new and bigger terminal at Myrtle Beach International Airport.

And a budget appropriation by Graham in fiscal 2006 provided \$200,000 toward engineering and design work for the trade center.

The funding is a small portion of what those three projects will cost, but it represents some of the biggest federal aid siphoned to the Grand Strand in the past decade.

“The travel industry is our state's largest employer, and the majority of that industry centers on the coast,” said U.S. Rep. Henry Brown, R-S.C. “I've kept that in mind since going to Washington and have taken every opportunity to promote the needs of Georgetown and Horry counties.”

Brown said he and other legislators intend to continue working together in coming years “to further the interests of the Grand Strand.”

That cooperation crosses political party lines, according to U.S. Rep. James Clyburn, D-S.C., whose district includes part of Georgetown County. Clyburn will be the No. 3 leader of the House as majority whip when the 110th Congress convenes in January.

“Henry Brown and I are close friends, and I'm pleased to work through Henry to get things done for Myrtle Beach,” Clyburn said. “We've been working together for a long time.”

#### A growing trend

One of the most noticeable changes in federal funding over the past decade has been the increase in federal pork doled out along the Grand Strand.

From 2004 to 2006, Horry and Georgetown counties received \$23 million in budget earmarks for projects such as stormwater drainage, maintenance of the Georgetown Harbour and acquisition of land for the Waccamaw National Wildlife Refuge.

That amount nearly equals the \$27.5 million in earmarks the Grand Strand received from 1995 to 2003.

Horry and Georgetown counties received an annual average of about 2 percent of all the earmark money given to South Carolina from 1995 to 2004, with Charleston, the Upstate and Columbia receiving the bulk of federal pork.

In some of those years, the Grand Strand received less than a half-percent of the money sent to South Carolina.

This area's share increased to 5.3 percent in 2005 and 6 percent in 2006.

The money this area has received in recent years is in addition to tens of millions of additional earmark dollars given to the state government for projects that include the Grand Strand, such as maintenance of the Intracoastal Waterway, new buses for mass transit agencies, police protection and economic development initiatives.

This area's earmarks also are in addition to money included in agencies' regular budgets for projects in Horry and Georgetown counties.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, for example, budgeted \$84 million between 1995 and 2006 for projects specific to the Grand Strand.

A controversial system

The earmark system, which lets legislators attach funding for home-state projects onto federal agencies' budget bills, is criticized by taxpayer watchdog groups who say public money often is misspent on special-interest projects funded with no oversight or debate by Congress.

“[Legislators] treat the federal treasury as their own personal piggy bank,” said Tom Finnigan, spokesman for Washington-based Citizens Against Government Waste, which has called for reforms of the earmark system.

Among the suggested reforms is a requirement that legislators attach their names to any earmark they sponsor. Under the current system, it is difficult to tell which member of Congress sponsored a particular earmark unless that person takes credit for it in a speech or news release.

Legislators have been hesitant to change the earmark system, and experts say there is little chance of meaningful reform under a Democrat-majority Congress.

Some earmarks have dubious value, such as \$1.5 million that was given to Georgetown-based nonprofit agency Five Rivers Community Development Corp. since 2004. Five Rivers shut down this month in the wake of a financial scandal and allegations that its executives misspent public money.

Some other earmarks never get used. For example, the Waccamaw Regional Transportation Authority has not been able to come up with matching local dollars

needed to draw down all of the \$1.325 million that has been earmarked in recent years for a transportation center in Myrtle Beach.

Dean, the chamber president, said that as long as the flawed earmark system exists, the Grand Strand should continue fighting for its share.

“Whether you like it or not, pork is very real, and it helps pay for important projects in this area that will spur economic growth,” Dean said. “When you're talking about building a road such as I-73 that will create jobs and improve tourism, the term pork doesn't seem appropriate.”

#### A personal approach

Most federal money won't find its way to the Grand Strand if legislators aren't keenly aware of this area's needs, experts say.

In some cases, a project will hold such a special interest to one lawmaker that it gets continual funding as long as that politician is in office.

That is what happened with the Waccamaw National Wildlife Refuge, which received \$13.95 million in federal earmarks from former U.S. Sen. Ernest Hollings from the 1998 to 2005 fiscal years. The refuge hasn't received a penny in earmarks in the budgets since Hollings retired at the start of 2005.

“Sen. Hollings' office would call us on an annual basis and ask what we might need from year to year,” said Craig Sasser, manager of the refuge. “The funding has dried up now.”

The 18,000-acre refuge, located in Horry, Georgetown and Marion counties, now depends on private donations, groups such as the Nature Conservancy and whatever money the U.S. Department of the Interior gives it for land acquisition and operations.

The refuge received about \$250,000 in private donations over the past year, but it is a far cry from the money that used to come through Hollings.

“We've had to get really creative in the past two years,” Sasser said. “I think the support [from federal legislators] is there. But when you measure us against competing interests including the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, we're just so small that we're not on the radar screen.”

#### Milking the cash cow

Getting on the radar screen usually involves lobbying federal lawmakers for money, an option the refuge is forbidden to do by federal law.

Representatives from the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce have made 11 trips to Washington this year, lobbying Congress to help fund I-73, the airport and other

projects. In previous years, chamber officials typically made just a couple of lobbying trips each year.

Members of Horry County Council also have lobbied Congress for funding for I-73 and the airport.

“We've been there far more than ever before, and I don't see it slowing down,” said Dean, the chamber president. “You're seeing a more frequent presence of Grand Strand business leaders in Washington, shaking the tree and looking for every last piece of pork.”

In addition to meeting with South Carolina's delegation, Dean said area business leaders are lobbying influential politicians from other states, such as Rep. John Mica, R-Fla., and Rep. Tom Petri, R-Wisc., who can hold the purse strings for key projects.

Mica and Petri are members of the U.S. House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, with Mica serving as chairman of the aviation subcommittee and Petri as chairman of the highways subcommittee.

“Our state delegation is ready, willing and able to deliver on our needs,” Dean said. “The biggest benefit is meeting with members outside of our state. They become familiar with our needs and the projects we think are important, and that helps us to get funding and make our priorities national priorities.”

Growing awareness of the Grand Strand by legislators outside of this state is combining with S.C. politicians' growing influence in Congress, Dean said.

Clyburn's ascension as majority whip and Rep. John Spratt's upcoming chairmanship of the House Budget Committee give both men the the clout to steer more financial aid to their home state's key projects.

“As a state, we're positioned fairly well to secure the needs of South Carolina, and in particular the Grand Strand,” Dean said.

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