

Oink oink! Crowdsourcing government earmark requests

A new project hopes to use volunteer labor to compile a list of all Congressionally requested "earmarks" into a central database. Get ready to slice, dice, sort, and map earmark requests online.

By Nate Anderson | Last updated July 21, 2009 7:03 PM CT

"People are desperate for fruitcake these days," says The Cato Institute's Jim Harper when explaining why he's giving one away as a prize in his crowdsourced earmark-exposure contest.

Behind the fruitcake lies a serious purpose: crowdsource the compilation of all federal legislators' "earmark" requests, those specific funding requests to dole out money directly to (hopefully) deserving entities in the legislator's home district.

Earmarks have long been criticized for their porcine appearance, but figuring out what was actually requested remained difficult or impossible. The requests were shrouded in secrecy—when the amount became public, it was unclear who had requested them, or why. Recent earmark reform rules in Congress mandate that each legislator must disclose his or her list of projects, but there's still no central clearinghouse for Congressional earmark activity.

So Harper added a new earmarks feature to his existing Washington Watch site, which already tracks bills moving through Congress. The idea is to crowdsource the data collection, directing users to Congressional websites that contain each representative's earmark information; this can then be entered into a Web form, after which it becomes part of the master database and shows up on a Google Maps earmark mashup.

When complete, the earmark data will be freely available for use by anyone who wants it—and Harper tells Ars that the most interesting applications might well come from matching up the earmarks database with existing fundraising databases.

"Transparency overall represents a shift in power," Harper says, praising experiments like done by new Congresswoman Jackie Speier. Speier put together a citizen's oversight panel that would review and sign off on earmark requests, then installed earmark critic Stanford professor Lawrence Lessig as the chair. ("Earmarks are a cancer," Lessig has written. "They feed the system of corruption that is the way Washington works. They are the cornerstone of a system feeding the worst of the lobbying mafia.")

Harper's earmark collection is not currently near completion, but already it has a set of interesting entries: \$160,000 for cranberry/blueberry pest control in Massachusetts, \$2,000,000 for "brown tree snake management" in Guam, and \$3,000,000 for "Conflict Mitigation through Women's Effective Political Participation."

Looking through the list inspired me to check out the earmarks made this year by my own Congressional representative, Peter Roskam (R-IL). They appeared refreshingly noncontroversial—perhaps even useful—and the idea of putting a "green roof" atop the hideous monstrosity that is our county administration building sounds like genius. But without efforts like Harper's, there's no easy way to compare Illinois representatives, or to see the projects overlaid on a map, or to sort by project cost.

In Harper's view, crowdsourcing works best for projects that need to collect factual material—Wikipedia, for instance—though not so well for more creative endeavors like novels or inaugural speeches.



To spur adoption, Harper is offering a Kindle, an iPod Shuffle, and of course the fruitcake to incentivize interested volunteers. He hopes that the earmark project will be a short-term one, the sort of thing that soon shows itself to be so useful that Congress gets its act together and simply publishes its own collected list of earmark requests each year. Success, in other words, means going out of business.

Those who want to help can start by finding an earmarks list, then filling in the Earmark Entry Form.

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