



## Republicans face pressure on earmarks promise

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HELENA — Newly empowered congressional Republicans, elected on promises to rein in federal spending and eliminate oft-criticized spending “earmarks,” are working on how to do that while still ensuring local needs are met.

“Congress doesn't need to earmark money to direct it to states if we write funding requirements for programs with greater care,” Rep. Denny Rehberg, R-Mont., wrote on Twitter on Thursday.

Rehberg has been critical of earmarks — the numerous amendments to spending bills that direct money to specific projects — in the latest federal budget cycle, joining other Republicans in abstaining from such requests.

Conservative critics of spending say the incoming Congress could be backsliding on the no-earmarks pledge, and Democrats who support the practice of earmarks say some of the Republican plans amount to earmarks by another name — with possibly with less transparency than in the current system.

“Thanks to the reforms we passed in 2007, all earmarks are public, including who asked for them and who's benefiting,” Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., said in a statement. “Unlike other tools legislators can use to deliver for their home states, earmarks force folks to lay all their cards on the table, out in the open for everyone to see.”

Rehberg disputes that claim.

“In fact, it's just the opposite,” he said in a statement. “If you want to spend tax dollars, you ought to have to debate it. Earmarks get buried in huge bills that contain thousands of other earmarks, so the vast majority pass unnoticed. Requiring lawmakers to defend and pass a separate piece of legislation to fund a project in their home state is just good government.”

He also countered an argument by Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., that eliminating earmarks gives more control to federal bureaucrats, who have less understanding of states' needs.

“It's an interesting claim, considering that these same establishment politicians then point out that earmarks only make up a tiny part of overall spending,” Rehberg said in the statement. “Are they so eager to cede decisions for the remaining spending? With or without earmarks, Congress should be taking a much more active role in all spending decisions. That's the problem with earmarks; they not only take up a completely disproportionate amount of time and effort, but they sustain the appearance that Congress is controlling spending when in reality it is not. It's intellectually dishonest to say the only way to fund a project is through earmarks.”

Rehberg points to a bill he sponsored directing the Office of National Drug Control Policy to fund methamphetamine prevention.

“It passed the House and Senate and was signed by the president,” he said. “That's precisely how you can fund a Montana priority without an earmark. It's not as easy as an earmark, but it's the right way to do it.”

Both parties claim to have led the charge for transparency in earmarks, and Montana lawmakers have prodded one another to release more information.

Tester recently sent a letter to Rehberg, asking him to reveal all the earmarks he's promoted since entering office in 1985.

Rehberg, who now posts all requests his office receives for earmarks, has challenged Tester and Baucus to do the same. Tester and Baucus post the earmarks they endorse, but not all the requests they receive.

In November, Baucus highlighted standalone bills introduced by Rehberg for Montana projects, calling the bills “loopholes” in the earmarks ban.

Lawmakers of both parties have also directed funds to their constituents another way — by making their case to federal agencies, through letters, phone calls, or invitations to visit key infrastructure. But that practice, often done proudly by the lawmakers, is also under scrutiny from spending critics.

The Washington, D.C.-based Cato Institute, a frequent critic of government spending, attacked incoming House Appropriations Committee Chairman Hal Rogers, R-Ky., pointing to a request he made to get a project in his district included in the health care package passed this year.

“No earmarks? No problem for Hal Rogers. He can just go the time-honored route of policymakers heckling federal agencies for pork,” Cato wrote. “Earmarks represent just one of many ways that parochial-minded members steer benefits to their districts at the expense of taxpayers and the general public good.”

Washington, D.C.-based watchdog Citizens Against Government Waste also had a warning for the new Congress.

“Any move by Republicans to weasel out of the earmark ban or game the system will be seen for what it is, a self-interested, blatant and unnecessary violation of their most important pledge for the new Congress,” said CAGW President Tom Schatz in a press release.