

This Week's True/False: Earmarks Are A Good Thing

*Opening statement from [Tad DeHaven](#), [budget analyst](#) at the libertarian-leaning *Cato Institute*.*

If one is concerned about the size and scope of our federal government, then “earmarking” is a decidedly bad thing. Earmarks are provisions inserted into spending bills by legislators for specific projects in their home states. One problem with earmarks is that most of the projects they fund are properly the responsibility of state and local governments or the private sector, not the federal government. Another problem is that earmarks grease the skids for bigger government. Stuffing a piece of broader spending legislation with earmarks helps garner support for the underlying bill from the various members of Congress who believe they will politically benefit from the largesse being lavished upon their constituents.

Proponents of earmarking often point to the fact that earmarked funds account for an extremely small portion of overall federal spending. While this is true, it is beside the point for the reasons cited above. However, the argument does raise a legitimate concern in that opponents of earmarking often fail to realize that the practice is a symptom, rather than the cause, of the problem of federal overspending. Therefore, opponents of earmarking should focus the bulk of their attention on eliminating the underlying programs from which earmarks are derived. For example, a shopping mall in Pennsylvania that receives earmarked funds represents an expenditure that would be just as egregious had the mall received the funds through the traditional bureaucratic process.