

Federal Computer Week

OMB and private groups track Congressional earmarks

A volunteer group has collected 17,500 earmark requests for a central database

- By [Alice Lipowicz](#)
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A volunteer project to publish [an online map and database](#) of Congress' earmark requests is nearly complete with more than 17,500 links collected. Meanwhile, the Office of Management and Budget is preparing to expand [its existing earmarks database](#) to include similar information in time for the fiscal 2011 appropriations process.

Earmarks are generally defined as legislative actions that direct spending to a specific recipient. They are inserted into laws at the request of one or more lawmakers and are [often criticized](#) as examples of wasteful spending that benefit special interests.

The goal of the volunteer WashingtonWatch.com project is to increase transparency by publishing the earmark requests online in a centralized public database, said Jim Harper. He is leading the project as a volunteer and also is director of information policy studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian-oriented think tank.

"We will have a better look at the whole earmarks ecosystem, which will help answer questions like: Who seeks earmarks? What earmarks are approved?" Harper said. "This is the public exercising oversight of Congress."

Meanwhile, OMB is preparing to expand its reporting on earmarks.

OMB has been publishing an online database of approved legislative earmarks included in appropriations laws since fiscal 2005. The agency plans to expand its database to include legislative earmark requests before the start of the fiscal 2011 budget year appropriations process next year, Kenneth Baer, OMB's communications director, said today.

"It will be going on our public Web site in time for the next budget — not 2010, but 2011," Baer said.

Currently, OMB's public Web site for earmarks offers information on laws from fiscal 2005 through fiscal 2008 with estimates for fiscal 2009.

Baer commended the volunteers' efforts to improve transparency. "We applaud the efforts of Congress and of WashingtonWatch.com

to make this data available," Baer said. "It is good that citizen groups are using this data."

For some years, information on earmarks has been scattered and most has not been released to the public. Earlier this year, House and Senate leaders stipulated that appropriations committees must publish all requested and approved earmarks.

House members and senators are supposed to release publicly their own earmark requests; however, the reporting is ad hoc and there is no central database.

The goal of WashingtonWatch.com is to create such a database. To encourage volunteers to submit earmark requests, Harper started an Earmark Contest in July offering a prize of an Amazon Kindle to the person who submits the most earmark requests.

"Entering earmarks in our earmark data entry form will make you a transparency hero," Harper wrote on his blog Aug. 9. Competition to win the contest is revving up. "The jockeying among our top earmark hunters is hot!" Harper added.

The competition will end Oct. 1, or when all earmarks are logged into the database, whichever is first.

Meanwhile, the contest is winning praise for its broad appeal. "This is a great way to get people more involved and to show how technology can be used to change the debate," said Adam Hughes, director of federal fiscal policy for OMB Watch, a nonprofit research organization. "These crowdsurfing techniques are starting to work."

About the Author

Alice Lipowicz is a staff writer for Federal Computer Week.

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