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# Under *the* Influence

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## Cato's Harper Looks For Help Tracking Earmarks

By Eliza Krigman

Similar to the work of the [transparency corps](#) at the Sunlight Foundation, WashingtonWatch.com is calling all citizens to contribute to an earmark database online to track how members of Congress steer federal funds to special interests and projects in their districts. While still a work-in-progress, the group's earmark [page](#) features information on hundreds of earmarks that can easily be organized by state or lawmaker.

Administered by **Jim Harper**, director of information policy studies at the Cato Institute, Washington Watch tracks bills by proposed cost and savings, newest and most active.

In addition to helping improve the transparency of government, Washington Watch is giving prizes to encourage citizens to participate. Ranked by the amount of earmarks you enter into the database, first place will receive an Amazon Kindle, second place an iPod shuffle and third place a fruitcake (if the last one raised any eyebrows, all winners can choose to receive the cash value of their prize.)

[See here for more information](#) on how to participate.

By compiling the requests, which had previously been scattered across individual members' websites, the project aims to take advantage of new earmark request disclosure rules that had failed to funnel disclosures into a searchable database or even to standardize reporting procedures. Rep. **Todd Tiahrt**, R-Kan. for instance, posts his earmarks as "Kansas Priority Projects;" many others call them "appropriations requests," and still others "legislative requests," among other names.

Despite his efforts, Harper said he's not incredibly concerned about earmark spending. Instead, he looks at the project as a step toward transparency and an experiment in how the public reacts to a full knowledge of earmark requests.

"I haven't been a big earmark battler. It's a small percentage of overall spending, but it's a powerful symbol to people, especially when [they're appropriated] behind the scenes," he said. "It could be earmarks are totally validated. I don't have skin in the game--I'm more interested in just finding out, rather than in trying to play a role in getting rid of earmarks."

The site has attracted a healthy amount of traffic and is selling some ads, attracting 5,000 unique visitors yesterday, according to Harper. He is funding it out-of-pocket, with help from the Sunlight Foundation.

With reporting by Sara Jerome.

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