



LEND A HAND: For a Plymouth woman, a hard life got worse

OUR OPINION: Earmark system hurts state more than it helps

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EDITORIAL — Barney Frank, like many in Congress, likes to note that without earmarks a lot of worthwhile projects would never get the funding they need to succeed.

The Newton Democrat has been quoted as saying being against earmarks is like being against bills.

Certainly, the South Shore is home to dozens of organizations that would have benefited from the earmarks that were until last week in the \$1.3 trillion spending bill.

Among the \$8 billion earmarked for 6,700 pet projects in the legislation were millions for Adams National Historical Park in Quincy, the original Thayer Library in Braintree and for Brockton Area Multi-Services.

That money vanished on Friday when the growing anti-earmark chorus in the Senate made it clear the funding had no chance of passage.

There's no doubt earmarks help small groups and communities gain access to federal money. But the mechanism is badly flawed, awarding money based on political power and persuasion rather than on merit. It has long been the case that states with senior members on appropriations committees get the most money.

What's more is that while it seems like we were in line for a nice chunk of the money being doled out, it's less than we paid in. A 2009 **study** done by the Libertarian Cato Institute found Massachusetts was among 34 states that received fewer earmark dollars than they proportionately should, based on tax dollars sent to Washington.

The study, done by Brandon Arnold, found we get less than half what we would get if the money were divvied up fairly.

A **story** in the Washington Post last week pointed to another ugly side to the process. It is common practice for groups to hire lobbyists, often former congressional aides or members, who use connections and institutional knowledge to win earmark funding. It's gotten to the point, critics say, that groups feel they have to hire such insiders in order to have a shot at success.

Steve Ellis of Taxpayers for Common Sense, a budget watchdog group, has rightly suggested that federal funding for local projects should be based on merit and competition.

Commenting on a case in the Post story in which Pascagoula, Miss., paid lobbyists to secure a \$900,000 earmark for a beach promenade, Ellis said the problem isn't so much unworthy projects as it is lack of transparency and competition.

"If the country wants to fund promenades, then Pascagoula should compete," Ellis said. "Maybe Pascagoula would get more than \$1 million. Or maybe they wouldn't get anything."

Dear as they may be to our hearts, worthy local groups seeking similar aid should go have to go through the same transparent and competitive process.

Earmarks took a knock-down blow on Friday, but it's hard to imagine they're gone for good, regardless of the symbolic vows being taken by some in Washington.

If they are revived, it should only happen with stipulations that keep them in the open and make them fair.

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Along with earmarks becoming a thing of the past, building planes, ships and unneeded plane engines that we don't need should also be a thing of the past (are you listening Senator Kerry). These unneeded planes, ships and engines are built to allow Congressmen to claim they saved jobs when they run for re-election - when instead they wasted taxpayer dollars.

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