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Advocates: Earmark database needed

By Walter Alrkon - 03/30/10 07:20 PM ET

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Congressional appropriators aren't meeting the White House's goal of creating a searchable earmark database, according to transparency advocates.

A group of watchdogs called EarmarkData.org is pressing lawmakers to follow through on the administration's push to make it easy to search for requests and awards of earmarks, which are the provisions members of Congress insert into spending bills to steer federal money to specific projects.

The transparency reforms undertaken since last year by Congress, while significant, have fallen short of the searchable earmark database wanted by the White House, the watchdog group said.

Congress has met one basic standard set by President Barack Obama. The House and Senate Appropriations committees have started sections on their websites that feature links to each lawmaker's earmark requests. The House website was started this month, while the Senate site went online last year.

Obama called on lawmakers in January to "publish all earmark requests on a single website before there's a vote, so that the American people can see how their money is being spent."

The online information comes a year after House Appropriations Chairman David Obey (D-Wis.) and Senate Appropriations Chairman Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii) required each lawmaker's official website to post those requests separately.

At the same time, Obama called for an earmark request website. His administration said it was "time for a comprehensive, bipartisan, state-of-the-art disclosure database that allows Americans to examine the details of every proposed earmark before a vote is taken — one that is fully searchable and otherwise user-friendly."

Jim Harper, a co-founder of EarmarkData.org, said that a searchable database would give the public the ability to use the earmark data in a useful way. Harper said outside experts still need months to sift through requests and the earmarks inserted in the dozen or more appropriations measures passed annually in order to make sense of them, even with appropriators putting earmark data online.

"Their good work has given the public a taste for more, to go all the way for full earmark transparency and satisfy public demand," said Harper, the director of information policy studies at the Cato Institute.

Making it easier to track earmarks, used in the past to reward political donors, would prevent corruption and help show that Congress could manage a small part of the federal government, he added.

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"If they can't do earmarks right, what can they do?" Harper said.

Earmarks, which totaled about \$16 billion in each of the past two years, make up about a half-percent of the federal budget, according to the nonpartisan Taxpayers for Common Sense.

Other groups that have backed the EarmarkData.org effort are the transparency advocacy organization Sunlight Foundation and earmark watchdogs Taxpayers for Common Sense and Citizens Against Government Waste.

The White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has updated its website for earmarks awarded in recent years, but it has yet to start a database that includes earmark requests for coming spending bills.

"The administration is on track for later this year to update the functionality of the earmarks database," said Tom Gavin, an OMB spokesman. "We are going to make it far easier for anyone to search and track earmarks through fields like sponsor, state, recipient and dollar amount."

Lawmakers are lukewarm to the idea of a new searchable database.

They note that they've made the information available online, an unprecedented step, and that groups such as Taxpayers for Common Sense have used it to assemble their own databases.

"We have instituted full reforms of the earmark process, increased transparency and cut back the dollar number of earmarks," said Ellis Brachman, an Obey spokesman.

Inouye is "very satisfied" with the transparency steps already taken, his spokesman Rob Blumenthal said.

"Since earmarks are also included in many authorization and tax measures, it would be up to others in the Senate to determine whether it would be useful to establish a centralized website to track all members' requests," Blumenthal added.

Sen. Tom Coburn (R-Okla.) will soon introduce a bill that would create the searchable earmark database, his office said.

"Many taxpayers are concerned votes continue to be bought and sold with earmarks," said Coburn spokesman John Hart. "Congress should implement President Obama's recommendations. Doing less suggests Congress has something to hide."

-- This article was updated at 9:49 a.m.

Comments (12)

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Republicans will continue to blame Obama and lie by saying he loves earmarks.

BY **ALLEN** on 03/30/2010 at 20:30

More broken promises. Obama promised the tax payers would be able to track every penny of stimulous money, announcing "tax payers will be the watch dogs". Where is the money reportedly spend in fake zip code areas and non existant congressional districts? Will web site for Ear Mark info cost \$85 million too?

BY **MON** on 03/30/2010 at 20:37

Instead of wasting money on a fancy program we should stop earmarks all together. If they nothing to do with the bill it shouldn't be allowed. Doug Keller is against earmarks, he's a candidate for US Congress in Oregon's 1st congressional district: <http://keller4congress.com> Join the Resistance!

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BY **OREGON RED** on 03/30/2010 at 21:44

What a shock - ANOTHER campaign promise of transparency broken. They are never going to get that site up running because their constituents might ask about the 450 FAKE CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICTS that taxpayer money has already been dispersed to!! There's no way to tie this scandal to Bush so the mainstream media will not even acknowledge it.

BY **NY PADDY** on 03/30/2010 at 21:57

Halfwits. You wanna stop earmarks? Take away the power of Congress to hand out goodies. If they can't give away other peoples money to buy votes, nobody, and I mean NOBODY, will give them a red cent. Problem solved.

BY **DOCINPA** on 03/30/2010 at 22:57

Agree with Docinpa. Even though earmarks are virtually insignificant as a percentage of the budget they have taken on a symbolic focus we have to acknowledge. If Congress can't solve the easy ones they have no chance of taking on the elephant in the living room...Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security...the biggest, fattest and most threatening programs in history.

BY **ORDOABCHAO** on 03/31/2010 at 01:33

A day late and a dollar short. Obama is a liar and a fraud. Why weren't we able to see the healthcare discussion or bill before queen nancy said we have to pass it to know what is in it. Liberal traitors

BY **HB** on 03/31/2010 at 02:35

What, no transparency, very hard to believe. Does anyone know where sections 3115 and 3116 are in the health care bill?

BY **RICK** on 03/31/2010 at 03:54

Obama seems to be searching for some poll numbers that get him out of the dumpster. Here's a very easy get: tell the House and Senate that he'll sign nothing — that is NOTHING — they send him until they establish the data base he promised. He seems to want to "get tough" with Republicans these days. A little "tough love" with his own party would yield bigger results.

BY **CURMUUDGEONIO** on 03/31/2010 at 04:04

Every thing that congressmen speak and write and put on line is public knowledge. Every email, every paper or letter every word should be accessible to the public and the internet is the only way that can be done. These people work for us and therefore transparency is a must and we should insist on it. How do we do that? At the polls in November. Vote out ALL incumbants and get some new blood in there. A congressman who has been in office thirty or forty years owes so many favores to so many people who have kept him in that job by donating money that there is no way he can make a honest vote on anything because he owes too much to too many. Two terms is more than enough for any given person. Pete

BY **NORMAN MCGILL** on 03/31/2010 at 07:35

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