

# Earmark Spending: Bad Fruit from Rotten Trees

*David A. Ditch*

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Earmarks were banned in 2011 due to a wave of scandals and public ridicule, but the practice returned in 2022.

The vast majority of earmarks are used to support niche and parochial political concerns rather than true national priorities.

Congress needs to get rid of wasteful, corrupt, and inappropriate spending such as earmarks and hyper-local grant programs in the appropriations process.

Article 1 of the U.S. Constitution vests Congress with the sole authority to authorize federal spending and revenue.<sup>1</sup> With the federal government now covering 333 million people and the world's largest economy, this is both an awesome power and a tremendous responsibility.

The exponential growth of federal activity and spending since the start of the 20th century has allowed many legislators to forget (or ignore) the proper boundaries of the federal government. One of the best examples of this regrettable trend was the tremendous growth of earmark spending beginning in the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> Earmarks, which are typically project-specific spending requests made by Members of Congress as part of the annual appropriations process, became a source of ridicule and scandal until bipartisan public anger resulted in an earmark ban in 2011.<sup>3</sup> This ban

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This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/bg3741>

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remained in place until legislators resumed the practice with fiscal year (FY) 2022 appropriations.<sup>4</sup>

Congress has already increased earmarking dramatically, from \$9 billion for 4,970 earmarks in FY 2022 to \$15.3 billion for 7,234 earmarks in FY 2023.<sup>5</sup> Information about earmarks can be difficult to track down, with lists placed in supplementary “explanatory statement” documents and key project details dispersed across the personal websites of members who made requests.<sup>6</sup>

Earmarks in the FY 2022 and FY 2023 omnibus appropriations packages flow from a relatively small number of programs and bureaus. Due to foundational flaws shared across these earmarked programs, Congress should substantially reduce spending on the programs even if the earmark ban returns. This would improve the nation’s shaky fiscal health, reverse a long-standing trend of federal encroachment on state and local responsibilities, and reduce political corruption that has no business existing in the greatest nation on earth.

## Root Cause: Unchecked Federal Bloat

The federal government, once relatively constrained in size and scope by the Constitution, grew exponentially in size and scope during the 20th century. Many of the largest departments today in terms of spending, regulatory authority, and employees—such as the Departments of Education, Energy, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, and Transportation—did not even exist in 1950. The expansion of federal activity served to centralize power both through direct federal control and through an increasing amount of influence from federal grants given to state and local governments.<sup>7</sup>

Increasing federal dominance over the nation leads to many glaring policy problems, including:

**Government Capture by Special Interests.** The enormity of the federal government presents a shortcut for narrow interests to obtain privileges.<sup>8</sup> Since the burden of federal spending is spread across the entire population, legislators can lavish billions of dollars on a particular industry, region, or ideological cause without drawing national ire. Once a benefit is created, special interests have strong incentives to lobby Congress to retain and grow the benefit, whereas taxpayers have a much smaller incentive per person to lobby against a particular benefit. Accordingly, lobbying efforts to maintain or expand federal power far outweigh lobbying efforts to shrink or devolve federal power. It should not be surprising that legislators have responded to the pressure (and political incentives) by steadily expanding federal activity.

### **Seemingly Intractable Waste, Dysfunction, and Overspending.**

The vast expanse of the federal enterprise has allowed many problems to fester for years. For example, the nonpartisan Government Accountability Office's *High Risk List* report series highlights dozens of significant problems with each iteration.<sup>9</sup> One of the items in the inaugural 1990 edition of the report, "Medicare questionable claims," is still present under the heading of Medicare "improper payments," with 89 open recommendations for this chronic problem area alone.<sup>10</sup> The size of the federal government far exceeds congressional capacity (or appetite) for oversight, and additional federal expansions compound the problem.

**Federal Encroachment on State and Local Governments, Businesses, and Civil Society.** Many policymakers assume that Washington should be involved in solving nearly every social or economic problem. This ignores the nation's long history of robust civil society organizations, free markets, and local governments finding solutions that best fit the specific needs of people and communities. Federal intervention crowds out these other actors, and one-size-fits-all federal approaches are rarely optimal (and are often actively counterproductive) in a nation as large and diverse as the United States.<sup>11</sup>

Earmark spending is emblematic of each of these problems.

**Earmarks Often Go to Special Interest Groups.** Lobbying activity and related corruption scandals were a significant factor behind the previous earmark ban.<sup>12</sup> However, increased transparency in the new earmark process does not change the fact that congressional offices are inundated by earmark lobbyists as businesses, local governments, and activist organizations vie for a share of federal loot.<sup>13</sup>

**Earmarks Are Often Obscenely Wasteful.** The gold standard for earmark waste was the Gravina Island Bridge, which became known as the "Bridge to Nowhere." It garnered national attention in the mid-2000s due to nine-digit costs despite benefitting only a tiny number of people in a remote part of Alaska.<sup>14</sup> Recent earmarks remain wasteful. FY 2022 earmarks included \$1.6 million for "equitable growth of shellfish aquaculture industry" in Rhode Island, \$4.2 million for "sheep experiment station infrastructure improvements" in Idaho, and \$3 million for a Mahatma Gandhi Museum in Houston.<sup>15</sup> None of these are an appropriate use of federal funds, especially as the nation's fiscal situation becomes increasingly perilous.

**Earmarks Are Directed Toward Projects that Ought to Be State, Local, or Private Responsibilities.** The House Appropriations Committee uses the phrase *Community Project Funding* when referring to earmarks. Earmarks relate almost exclusively to community-level items such as sidewalk improvements, public housing, museum facilities, and industrial parks.

However, the most appropriate place to make decisions about the worth of a community-level project is within the community itself, whether through local government, businesses, or civic organizations.<sup>16</sup> By offloading project costs onto Uncle Sam, these groups can shirk core responsibilities and at times obtain funding for marginal projects that would otherwise fail due to insufficient local support.<sup>17</sup>

Congress would be fully justified in resuming the earmark ban to combat corruption, reduce the time and resources that congressional offices devote to earmark requests, and reduce the ability of appropriators to use earmarks as a logrolling tool for increased spending levels.

However, the previous earmark ban did not fully resolve problems related to federal overreach. Instead, programs previously subject to earmarks marched on with tens of billions of dollars in annual funding, only with project decisions made by state and federal bureaucrats rather than Members of Congress. Therefore, it is vital for Congress to both ban earmarks and eliminate or significantly reform the programs that the earmarks flow from. If a renewed earmark ban did not ultimately reduce federal spending and control, it would be only a limited victory.<sup>18</sup>

An examination of both individual FY 2023 earmarks and their programmatic origins reveals a tremendous amount of corruption, waste, and inappropriate federal activity. The following sections highlight key programs and noteworthy earmarks, organized by appropriations subcommittees.

## Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration

**Rural Programs.** The Department of Agriculture operates several subsidy programs focused on rural areas. Of these, there is significant earmarking for the Rural Housing Service, Rural Utilities Service, and Rural Community Facilities Program.

Each of these programs is an exercise in political box-checking, with Members representing rural areas claiming credit for providing “free” benefits. Meanwhile, the real-world rationale for rural subsidies is severely lacking.<sup>19</sup>

- The Rural Housing Service, initially created to provide credit to farmers in the mid-20th century, now primarily offers means-tested housing credit for rural homeowners. This creates housing market distortions, and the program is very poorly managed.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile,

TABLE 1

## Fiscal Year 2023 Rural Development Earmarks

Chamber	Item	Cost	Location	Sponsor(s)	Comments
House	Economic Development Center	\$3.5 million	Hertford County, NC	Butterfield	Taxpayer funded corporate welfare is unfair.
House	Broadband internet	\$3.75 million	Salem County, NJ	Van Drew	Local broadband service is an inappropriate use of federal funds.
Senate	Agricultural museum	\$3.3 million	Door County, WI	Baldwin	Funding a tourism spot on a rural peninsula is unwise.
Senate	County government facility	\$5.47 million	McDowell County, WV	Capito	This is worth about 11% of the county's entire budget.
Senate	Sidewalks	\$1.76 million	Rainelle, WV	Capito, Manchin	Would a town of 1,190 people vote to spend this much on sidewalks?
Senate	Streetscaping	\$2 million	Munising, MI	Peters, Stabenow	Over \$1,000 per resident for sidewalk and utility upgrades.
Senate	Children's theater renovation	\$1 million	Kenai, Alaska	Murkowski	With debt skyrocketing, Uncle Sam shouldn't overhaul theaters.
Senate	Auditorium upgrades	\$3.45 million	Barre, VT	Sanders	Primarily used for high school basketball, and as such not a federal responsibility.
Senate	Community center	\$4.79 million	Newport, NH	Shaheen	Local community centers are not a federal responsibility.
Senate	Straits Cultural Center	\$1 million	St. Ignace, MI	Stabenow	Would local taxpayers approve of spending \$1 million on a "cultural center"?

**SOURCES:** News release, Senate Committee on Appropriations, "Chairman Patrick Leahy Releases Fiscal Year 2023 Omnibus Appropriations Bill," December 20, 2022, <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/news/majority/chairman-patrick-leahy-d-vt-releases-fiscal-year-2023-omnibus-appropriations-bill> (accessed January 10, 2023); U.S. Census Bureau, "Tables," <https://data.census.gov/all> (accessed January 10, 2023).

Rural Housing Service earmarks show that Congress sees the program as a slush fund for rural areas, with projects ranging from "economic development" (i.e., corporate welfare) to environmental conservation to local government facilities.


- The Rural Utilities Service was created during the Great Depression at a time when many rural areas lacked electricity. That has not been a problem since shortly after World War II, and private energy providers have the capability and incentives to ensure that rural Americans can keep the lights on.<sup>21</sup> The program has branched out into broadband services, which also ought to be left to the private sector.<sup>22</sup>

TABLE 2

## Fiscal Year 2023 Energy Project Earmarks

Chamber	Item	Cost	Location	Sponsor(s)	Comments
House	Solar panels at a park	\$1 million	Oyster Bay, NY	Garbarino	Quite a lot to spend on solar panels for a park.
House	Community center solar	\$2 million	Dallas, TX	Johnson (TX)	Quite a lot to spend on solar panels for a community center.
Senate	Solar energy program	\$2 million	Southern Oregon U.	Merkley, Wyden	Oregon is not particularly sunny.
Senate	LED lighting	\$2 million	Stamford, CT	Blumenthal, Murphy	Stamford can easily afford to pay for its own lighting projects.
Senate	Two solar energy projects	\$4.5 million	Wisconsin	Baldwin	Wisconsin ranks as one of the least sunny states.
Senate	Solar array	\$1.1 million	Kirkland, WA	Murray	King County ranks as the 2,946th sunniest county in the U.S. out of 3,111.

**SOURCES:** News release, Senate Committee on Appropriations, “Chairman Patrick Leahy Releases Fiscal Year 2023 Omnibus Appropriations Bill,” December 20, 2022, <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/news/majority/chairman-patrick-leahy-d-vt-releases-fiscal-year-2023-omnibus-appropriations-bill> (accessed January 10, 2023); U.S. Census Bureau, “Tables,” <https://data.census.gov/all> (accessed January 10, 2023).

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- The Rural Community Facilities Program is clearly a slush fund, and many Senators seek to take advantage of it. Senate earmarks for this program include museums, theaters, local infrastructure, and local government facilities.

Each of the items in the above table would require significant debate if local governments and community groups had to fully finance the projects themselves. Using the federal appropriations process allows them to mostly (or completely) avoid cost-benefit analysis and property tax hikes at the expense of taxpayers elsewhere in the country. This is wasteful and unfair.

## Energy and Water Development

**Energy Projects.** The Department of Energy subsidizes most types of energy production either directly in the form of grants and tax credits or indirectly in the form of paying for research activity. Solar, wind, and other types of “green” energy receive a significantly disproportionate share of federal energy spending in relation to the amount of energy they produce, though subsidies for oil, gas, and coal are also problematic.<sup>23</sup> For too long, the Department of Energy has attempted to micromanage a sector of the

TABLE 3

## Fiscal Year 2023 Small Business Administration Earmarks

Chamber	Item	Cost	Location	Sponsor(s)	Comments
Both	Zora’s House	\$1 million	Columbus, OH	Rep. Beatty, Sen. Brown	A “coworking and community space” for “women and gender expansive people of color.”
Both	Inwood Merchant Association	\$1.73 million	New York, NY	Rep. Espaillat, Sen. Schumer	Corporate welfare for a neighborhood business group in Manhattan.
Both	Inclusive Ventures Program	\$1.65 million	Annapolis, MD	Rep. Sarbanes, Sens. Cardin and Van Hollen	One of many similar items designed to help businesses based on identity characteristics.
House	On-street dining project	\$1.5 million	Pasadena, CA	Chu	Absurd to spend \$1.5 million on people eating outside in southern California.
House	PowerUp Latinx Business Initiative	\$400,000	Boston, MA	Pressley	Promoting “Latinx,” a term that Hispanics overwhelmingly reject but progressive activists adore.
House	Partnership for Community Action	\$650,000	Albuquerque, NM	Stansbury	Funding an “economic justice” project from an activist group obsessed with “white supremacy.”
Senate	Small business facades	\$500,000	Wheeling, WV	Capito, Manchin	A federal handout for a few new storefronts is arbitrary corporate welfare.
Senate	Wild blueberry research	\$3 million	University of Maine	Collins, King	“New technologies” to help “small wild blueberry growers” with “sustainability.”

**SOURCES:** News release, Senate Committee on Appropriations, “Chairman Patrick Leahy Releases Fiscal Year 2023 Omnibus Appropriations Bill,” December 20, 2022, <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/news/majority/chairman-patrick-leahy-d-vt-releases-fiscal-year-2023-omnibus-appropriations-bill> (accessed January 10, 2023); U.S. Census Bureau, “Tables,” <https://data.census.gov/all> (accessed January 10, 2023).

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economy for the sake of realizing political goals, with a dismal track record to show for billions of dollars in annual spending.<sup>24</sup>

Examining earmarked spending on energy projects serves to magnify the problems involved with federal activity in the sector. For example, Members obtained expensive solar energy projects for low-sunlight states such as New York, Washington, and Wisconsin.<sup>25</sup> The economic viability of earmarked energy projects is a tertiary concern behind political jockeying and virtue signaling.

## Financial Services

**Small Business Administration.** Benefitting from positive public sentiment surrounding small businesses, the Small Business Administration (SBA) duplicates a variety of privately provided services—including financing, training, and counseling—with added layers of bureaucracy and taxpayer subsidization.<sup>26</sup>

TABLE 4

### Fiscal Year 2023 EPA State and Tribal Assistance Grants Earmarks

Chamber	Item	Cost	Location	Sponsor(s)	Comments
Both	Water treatment	\$2.4 million	Tucker, MS	Rep. Guest, Sens. Hyde-Smith and Wicker	Cost of over \$3,700 per resident.
Both	Wastewater treatment	\$3 million	Mountainair, NM	Rep. Stansbury, Sen. Lujan	Cost of over \$3,300 per resident.
Both	Sewer system	\$4.15 million	Oneida Castle, NY	Rep. Tenney, Sens. Gillibrand and Schumer	Cost of over \$7,000 per resident.
Both	Water system	\$5 million	Triadelphia and Valley Grove, WV	Rep. McKinley, Sens. Capito and Manchin	Cost of over \$5,000 per resident.
House	Sewage/stormwater system	\$3.45 million	Milford Borough, PA	Cartwright	Cost of over \$3,000 per resident.
Senate	Wastewater treatment	\$4.4 million	Ansted, WV	Capito, Manchin	Cost of over \$3,000 per resident.
Senate	Water service expansion	\$2.5 million	Brooten, MN	Klobuchar, Smith	Cost of roughly \$4,000 per resident.
Senate	Water and sewer lines	\$3 million	St. George, AK	Murkowski	Cost of over \$44,000 per resident.
Senate	Wastewater improvements	\$1.6 million	Canadian, OK	Inhofe	Cost of over \$10,000 per resident.
Senate	Water and wastewater	\$3 million	Crawford, MS	Hyde-Smith, Wicker	Cost of over \$7,200 per resident.
Senate	Water systems	\$1.3 million	Grand Isle, ME	Collins, King	Cost of over \$3,500 per resident.
Senate	Replacement sewer system	\$1.9 million	Malden, WA	Murray	Cost of roughly \$8,800 per resident.
Senate	Wastewater treatment	\$1.9 million	Maxwell, NM	Heinrich	Cost of over \$8,400 per resident.
Senate	Water system improvements	\$2.82 million	Paisley, OR	Merkley, Wyden	Cost of over \$11,000 per resident.
Senate	Waterworks upgrades	\$3.05 million	Fulton, AR	Boozman	Cost of over \$8,300 per person served.
Senate	Waterwater treatment	\$1.25 million	Naurita, CO	Bennet, Hickenlooper	Cost of over \$2,500 per resident.

**SOURCES:** News release, Senate Committee on Appropriations, “Chairman Patrick Leahy Releases Fiscal Year 2023 Omnibus Appropriations Bill,” December 20, 2022, <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/news/majority/chairman-patrick-leahy-d-vt-releases-fiscal-year-2023-omnibus-appropriations-bill> (accessed January 10, 2023); U.S. Census Bureau, “Tables,” <https://data.census.gov/all> (accessed January 10, 2023).

As the table above highlights, earmarks for the SBA are a mixture of corporate welfare, woke identity politics, and bizarre boondoggles. While Congress should dump these wasteful earmarks, they should also scrutinize whether the SBA delivers anywhere near enough economic benefit to justify billions in annual funding.



## Interior, Environment

**Environmental Protection Agency Water Grants.** The bulk of the Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA’s) budget goes toward grants to states and tribal authorities. This is another example of the federal government subsidizing local responsibilities and adding bureaucratic costs and delays rather than adding value. Responsible localities that build and maintain water systems end up subsidizing localities that wait for a turn at Washington’s cash spigot.

As the above table demonstrates, many of the water earmarks included in FY 2023 appropriations amount to huge windfalls for small towns and villages at the expense of taxpayers from the rest of the country. The most glaring example of this is St. George, Alaska. A tiny and extremely remote island with a shrinking population of 67 people, St. George will receive \$3 million (over \$44,000 per person) for water and sewer lines from its earmark. Perhaps the project would bring \$44,000 in value for each of the residents, but since they are the only ones benefitting, they should bear the cost. Incredibly, St. George will receive another \$2.5 million for a harbor project by the Army Corps of Engineers, for a total of over \$82,000 in earmark spending per person.

## Labor, Health and Human Services, Education

**Education Programs.** The U.S. Department of Education has been a wasteful mistake ever since its founding in 1980, and federal subsidies for public schools serve to prop up a dysfunctional and often corrupt status quo.<sup>27</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed many significant problems with public education across the country and magnified the urgency of reforms that would enhance educational choices for families.<sup>28</sup>

Earmarks for federal educational programs provide a window into the skewed priorities of some Members of Congress. The FY 2022 omnibus included funding for the RAISE Institute at Ohio State University, which is designed to support professors who are explicit activists on racial matters.<sup>29</sup> FY 2023 earmarks include the ridiculous (Hip Hop Museum) alongside several that advance a left-wing social agenda, such as training for teachers from the Equity Institute and subsidizing “LGBTQIA+ Pride Centers” on campuses.

While eliminating education earmarks would be a step in the right direction, it is also vital to broadly decrease federal support for the educational establishment. This would reduce the obscene federal debt burden facing the nation’s children and make it easier for states to move away from the union-dominated status quo.

TABLE 5

## Fiscal Year 2023 Education Earmarks

Chamber	Item	Cost	Location	Sponsor(s)	Comments
Both	Poultry science workforce development	\$4 million	Athens, GA	Rep. Scott, Sens. Ossoff and Warnock	Duplicative of Department of Agriculture research spending.
House	Atlanta University Consortium's Pathways to Government	\$2 million	Atlanta, GA	Williams	The federal government would spend millions to encourage people to get government jobs.
House	Community college pride centers	\$1.2 million	San Diego, CA	Jacobs	Expands "LGBTQIA+ Pride Centers" on campuses of San Diego Community College.
House	Center for DACA students	\$1.2 million	San Diego, CA	Vargas	"Dreamer Resource Centers" to provide a "safe space" and "advocacy support" at San Diego Community College.
Senate	Universal Hip Hop Museum	\$2 million	New York, NY	Schumer	To "build capacity" for an educational program.
Senate	Equity Institute training for teachers	\$477,000	Providence, RI	Whitehouse	Indoctrinating teachers through programs such as "antiracism virtual labs."
Senate	"Jacob's Pillow" Dance Festival	\$100,000	Becket, MA	Markey, Warren	The federal government should not support local events promoted by organizations with extensive private funding.

**SOURCES:** News release, Senate Committee on Appropriations, "Chairman Patrick Leahy Releases Fiscal Year 2023 Omnibus Appropriations Bill," December 20, 2022, <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/news/majority/chairman-patrick-leahy-d-vt-releases-fiscal-year-2023-omnibus-appropriations-bill> (accessed January 10, 2023); U.S. Census Bureau, "Tables," <https://data.census.gov/all> (accessed January 10, 2023).

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## Transportation, Housing and Urban Development

**“Highway” and Transit Infrastructure.** The Highway Trust Fund (HTF) is painstakingly designed to maximize political benefits by allowing elected officials at all levels of government to be lauded for their involvement in projects ranging from the practical to the niche to the absurd.<sup>30</sup> The 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) ramped up spending through the HTF, and appropriations earmarks provide an avenue for Members of Congress (and lobbyists) to access billions in deficit-financed funding per year for their preferred cuts of transportation pork.<sup>31</sup>

One could be forgiven for assuming that earmarks under the Highway Infrastructure Programs category would primarily go toward improving the interstate highway system. Not only is this not the case, but reality is almost the exact opposite. For decades, Congress has added carve-outs within the

TABLE 6

## Fiscal Year 2023 Highway Infrastructure Earmarks

Chamber	Item	Cost	Location	Sponsor(s)	Comments
Both	People Movement Project	\$5 million	Glendora, CA	Rep. Chu, Sens. Feinstein and Padilla	A grab bag of purely local infrastructure such as trails, landscaping, and bike lanes.
Both	Cycling track	\$4 million	Herndon, VA	Rep. Connolly, Sens. Kaine and Warner	Bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure in one of the highest-income parts of the country.
Both	City staircases	\$7 million	Pittsburgh, PA	Rep. Doyle, Sen. Casey	Uses federal “highway” funding to cover a textbook local government responsibility.
Both	Pedestrian bridges	\$3.5 million	Tolleson, AZ	Rep. Gallego, Sens. Kelly and Sinema	Pedestrian infrastructure is a local responsibility, and this would cost nearly \$500 per resident.
Both	Electric vehicle infrastructure	\$4.3 million	Sacramento, CA	Rep. Matsui, Sens. Feinstein and Padilla	Specifically subsidizing the city government’s electric vehicles.
Both	Path, transit, and “equity”	\$3.5 million	Normal, IL	Rep. LaHood, Sen. Duckworth	Implementing a variety of woke infrastructure concepts along a single street.
House	Walnut Creek Trail	\$5 million	Austin, TX	Doggett	Austin, a trendy and prosperous city, can pay for its own trails.
House	Sidewalks and “streetscapes”	\$3 million	Watertown, CT	Hayes	More purely local infrastructure, including greenery.
House	Bus hub and road diet	\$5.5 million	Norwalk, CT	Himes	Progressive infrastructure: reducing capacity for cars (“road diet”), expanding transit.
House	Michelle Obama trail	\$3.62 million	DeKalb County, GA	Johnson (GA)	Spending millions to celebrate a politician’s wife while the national debt soars.
House	Shared use path	\$4 million	Bisbee, AZ	Kirkpatrick	Bisbee has lost half its population, and spending almost \$1,000 per person on a path is unwise.
House	Complete Streets project	\$5 million	Orlando, FL	Murphy	Spending millions with the stated goal of slowing cars down on a local road.
House	Traffic calming	\$4 million	El Monte, CA	Napolitano	“Traffic calming” is a euphemism for more congestion and gridlock to slow cars down.
House	Streetscaping	\$4 million	Poolesville, MD	Trone	More “traffic calming” and pedestrian infrastructure for a town.
House	Transit impact report	\$4.8 million	Kendall County, IL	Underwood	Spends millions to produce an environmental report on expanding transit near Chicago.
Senate	Trails in a park	\$6 million	Cumberland, MD	Cardin, Van Hollen	Includes a boardwalk, a pedestrian bridge, and landscaping, all for a single park.
Senate	Complete Streets project	\$4.5 million	Dover, NH	Shaheen	Reconstructing a local road that is apparently too focused on cars.
Senate	Downtown infrastructure	\$5 million	Ely, NV	Cortez Masto, Rosen	An expensive “complete streets” project (i.e. bike lanes) in a city of 3,924 people.

**SOURCES:** News release, Senate Committee on Appropriations, “Chairman Patrick Leahy Releases Fiscal Year 2023 Omnibus Appropriations Bill,” December 20, 2022, <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/news/majority/chairman-patrick-leahy-d-vt-releases-fiscal-year-2023-omnibus-appropriations-bill> (accessed January 10, 2023); U.S. Census Bureau, “Tables,” <https://data.census.gov/all> (accessed January 10, 2023).

HTF that allow funds to go toward hyper-local projects such as bike lanes, sidewalks, and even “road diet” or “complete streets” projects that aim to reduce automobile usage for the sake of various progressive causes.<sup>32</sup>

As the above table demonstrates, Members of Congress are all too willing to throw taxpayer dollars at extremely questionable earmarks that are completely disconnected from the original purpose of the HTF. From staircases in Pittsburgh, to a Michelle Obama Trail in Georgia, to multi-million-dollar environmental impact reports, it seems as though almost anything is allowed within the “highway” category. However, it is worth noting that even a large portion of conventional road projects in the category are for main streets and commercial boulevards that ought to be state or local responsibilities.

Congress should finally recognize that there is no longer a serious justification for massive federal involvement in surface transportation financing. State governments and the private sector are more than capable of maintaining and enhancing the interstate highway system, and local governments should stop seeking handouts for parochial projects. The federal government can help facilitate this by lowering the national gas tax, reforming rules that prevent tolling on many interstate highways, and eliminating regulations that needlessly increase construction costs.<sup>33</sup>

The largest diversion from highways in the HTF is for mass transit, which accounts for a small and shrinking portion of America’s transportation usage yet reaps a growing portion of federal transportation spending. The IIJA provided a larger percentage increase to transit than it did to highways despite a sharp drop-off in transit usage following the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>34</sup>

Transit funds exist as a sop to the political left, and this is reflected in the types of projects selected for transit earmarks in the table above. From “green” buses to transit expansions in places where existing transit is underused to fancy bike garages, transit earmarks are virtually guaranteed to deliver minimal value to taxpayers while allowing urban Members of Congress to brag about their bacon.

Ultimately, federal subsidies for mass transit are a barely disguised jobs program for unionized transit workers, who form a cog in urban political machines and receive inflated compensation packages.<sup>35</sup> While Congress should significantly reduce spending on highways, it should eliminate transit spending entirely.<sup>36</sup>

**Community Development.** The Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Community Development Fund (CDF), which primarily flows into the Community Development Block Grant program, is perhaps the most blatant political slush fund in the entire federal government. It

TABLE 7

## Fiscal Year 2023 Transit Earmarks

Chamber	Item	Cost	Location	Sponsor(s)	Comments
Both	Transit center	\$7 million	Ypsilanti, MI	Rep. Dingell, Sen. Stabenow	The value of expanding transit service in the Detroit area is minimal.
Both	Secure bike parking	\$428,000	Montgomery County, MD	Rep. Raskin, Sens. Cardin and Van Hollen	Expensive bike garages are mostly empty in other parts of the wealthy DC area.
Both	Solar lighting at transit stops	\$1.96 million	Las Vegas, NV	Rep. Titus, Sens. Cortez Masto and Rosen	Minuscule environmental impact, and a project that is entirely local in nature.
Both	Zero fare bus stops	\$1.8 million	Olympia, WA	Rep. Strickland, Sen. Murray	Some programs are criticized as giving a “free ride,” but this is literal free rides.
Both	Bus rapid transit	\$3 million	Syracuse, NY	Rep. Katko, Sen. Schumer	Syracuse had a population peak in 1950 and does not need more transit.
House	Garage for zero emission buses	\$5 million	Portland, OR	Bonamici	Green New Deal: subsidies for transit and “green” energy, little real-world benefit.
House	Solar-powered bus charging	\$2.5 million	Pinellas County, FL	Crist	Green New Deal: subsidies for transit and “green” energy, little real-world benefit.
House	Transit parking	\$2.5 million	Lawrence County, OH	Johnson	The Ohio/West Virginia border area is not a location where transit is likely to thrive.
House	Rail transit expansion	\$1.8 million	Sonoma County, CA	Huffman	This transit line has low ridership, and the area can afford to waste its own money.
House	Study on rail expansion	\$2 million	Danbury, CT	Hayes	\$2 million just for an environmental impact study. Bureaucracy at its finest.
House	Bus replacement	\$8 million	Chapel Hill, NC	Price	An upscale area in better position to pay for buses than the federal government.
House	Hydrogen fueling station	\$2.5 million	Thousand Palms, CA	Ruiz	Spending millions in a small city to support cars that few people own.
Senate	Electric bus infrastructure	\$6.7 million	Illinois	Durbin	More Green New Deal.
Senate	Zero emission bus infrastructure	\$10 million	Hawaii	Schatz	More Green New Deal.
Senate	Electric bus infrastructure	\$4 million	Atlanta, GA	Warnock	More Green New Deal.

**SOURCES:** News release, Senate Committee on Appropriations, “Chairman Patrick Leahy Releases Fiscal Year 2023 Omnibus Appropriations Bill,” December 20, 2022, <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/news/majority/chairman-patrick-leahy-d-vt-releases-fiscal-year-2023-omnibus-appropriations-bill> (accessed January 10, 2023); U.S. Census Bureau, “Tables,” <https://data.census.gov/all> (accessed January 10, 2023).

was originally intended to target blighted urban areas, but legislators can now use it to pay for practically any project so long as it is sufficiently local, making CDF a perfect negative example of Congress prioritizing narrow constituencies rather than truly national needs.<sup>37</sup>

TABLE 8

## Fiscal Year 2023 Community Development Earmarks: Tourism and Recreation (Page 1 of 2)


Chamber	Item	Cost	Location	Sponsor(s)	Comments
Both	Historic preservation in two towns	\$3 million	Maine	Rep. Golden, Sens. Collins and King	Would Wayne and East Machias approve spending over \$1,000 per person on preservation?
Both	Skate park	\$500,000	Burrillville, RI	Rep. Langevin, Sen. Whitehouse	The federal government should not subsidize local recreational facilities.
Both	Storm King sculpture museum	\$1.6 million	New Windsor, NY	Rep. Maloney, Sens. Gillibrand and Schumer	The federal government should especially not fund niche tourist traps.
Both	“Great Blacks in Wax” Museum upgrades	\$2 million	Baltimore, MD	Rep. Mfume, Sens. Cardin and Van Hollen	Taxpayers should not fund racially themed museums.
Both	Irish Heritage Center	\$3 million	Portland, ME	Rep. Pingree, Sens. Collins and King	There are substantial private resources for celebrating and preserving Irish heritage.
House	Theater and event space	\$3 million	Pittston, PA	Cartwright	Would a city of 7,591 pay \$3 million out of pocket for a theater?
House	Acquiring land for conservancy	\$3 million	Los Angeles, CA	Chu	The area is filled with parks and reserves. This would “connect” them a little more.
House	Destination Little Ethiopia	\$2.15 million	Los Angeles, CA	Bass	Tourism promotion, including “decorative crosswalks and gateway signage.”
House	Reconstruction of public pool	\$4 million	Waterbury, CT	Hayes	A community pool can be a good local project but not with federal funds.
House	Restoration of Forest Theater	\$4 million	Dallas, TX	Johnson	A community theater can be a worthwhile local project but not with federal funds.
House	Connecticut Trolley Museum	\$750,000	East Windsor, CT	Larson	The federal government should not fund tourist traps.
House	Performing arts center	\$4 million	Hacienda Heights, CA	Napolitano	A nicer performing arts center does not necessitate federal funding.
House	Chinatown arts building	\$2.5 million	San Francisco, CA	Pelosi	Federal taxpayers should not pay for arts facilities for San Francisco elites.
House	Botanical gardens	\$3 million	Artesia, CA	Sanchez	This project has no place in federal legislation during a time of high deficits.
House	Sports complex renovation	\$3 million	Lowell, MA	Trahan	Athletics can unite communities but does not require federal subsidies.
House	Bahamian, Contemporary Art museums	\$7 million	Miami, FL	Wilson	Two earmarks. Miami is a tourism destination and does not need subsidies for more.
Senate	B360 “Educational Campus”	\$2 million	Baltimore, MD	Cardin, Van Hollen	B360 is a nonprofit that seeks to “utilize dirt bike culture to end the cycle of poverty.”
Senate	Motown Museum expansion	\$10 million	Detroit, MI	Stabenow	Successful museums should finance their own expansions.
Senate	Ozark Empire Fairgrounds	\$5 million	Springfield, MO	Blunt	The federal government should not subsidize recreational facilities.
Senate	Renovation for Carnegie Hall at Rust College	\$3 million	Holly Spring, MS	Wicker	Closed since 1982, this would be a second pot of federal money for the project.

TABLE 8

## Fiscal Year 2023 Community Development Earmarks: Tourism and Recreation (Page 2 of 2)

Chamber	Item	Cost	Location	Sponsor(s)	Comments
Senate	Universal Hip Hop Museum “Fit Out”	\$3 million	New York, NY	Gillibrand	The Hip Hop Museum is poised to get a total of \$5 million from two earmarks.
Senate	Shawnee Sports Complex	\$3 million	Dunbar, WV	Manchin	Tourism and Welcome Center project. Inappropriate use of federal funds.

**SOURCES:** News release, Senate Committee on Appropriations, “Chairman Patrick Leahy Releases Fiscal Year 2023 Omnibus Appropriations Bill,” December 20, 2022, <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/news/majority/chairman-patrick-leahy-d-vt-releases-fiscal-year-2023-omnibus-appropriations-bill> (accessed January 10, 2023); U.S. Census Bureau, “Tables,” <https://data.census.gov/all> (accessed January 10, 2023).

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In FY 2022, Congress dipped into the CDF to fund a staggering number of wasteful and inappropriate projects, including “cultural placekeeping” in San Francisco, “recreational infrastructure” in North Carolina, and a Gandhi museum in Houston.<sup>38</sup>

The FY 2023 CDF earmarks remain as wasteful and inappropriate as the year before. Further, the volume of problematic CDF projects is so staggering that it requires categorization to properly comprehend.

At a time when federal deficits are expected to exceed \$1 trillion per year for the foreseeable future,<sup>39</sup> directing federal funds toward local recreation and tourism projects ought to be beyond the pale. As the above table shows, legislators have requested a slew of earmarks for theaters, ethnic neighborhood cultural trappings, pools, sports venues, museum amenities, a skate park, and even a Baltimore organization that purports to “utilize dirt bike culture.”

Another major subcategory of CDF earmark spending is local infrastructure. As the above table demonstrates, these fall prey to the same mistakes as other infrastructure program earmarks. In some cases, earmarks lavish millions on projects for very small towns. In other cases, there are absurdities such as \$4 million for a pond excavation in Maine, project feasibility studies that cost millions apiece, and “soy-enabled rural road reconstruction” in Iowa.

It is worth pointing out the large number of CDF earmarks for affordable housing projects. There can be no denying that housing costs are reaching crisis levels in many metro areas across the country, and some traditionally



TABLE 9

## Fiscal Year 2023 Community Development Earmarks: Local Infrastructure

Chamber	Item	Cost	Location	Sponsor(s)	Comments
Both	Transit feasibility study	\$1.5 million	Prince George's County, MD	Rep. Brown, Sens. Cardin and Van Hollen	\$1.5 million just for a study.
Both	Carbon neutral buildings	\$2.5 million	Ann Arbor, MI	Rep. Dingell, Sens. Peters and Stabenow	Subsidizing the local government and the Green New Deal at the same time.
Both	Library	\$3 million	Stamford, CT	Rep. Himes, Sens. Blumenthal and Murphy	Stamford can and should pay for its own libraries.
Both	Streetscape drainage improvements	\$4 million	Encinitas, CA	Rep. Levin, Sen. Padilla	A nice beach city that does not need a penny of deficit-financed federal charity.
Both	Water improvements	\$4 million	Empire, CO	Rep. Neguse, Sen. Hickenlooper	Cost of over \$11,500 per resident.
Both	Beach area streetlights	\$2 million	San Diego, CA	Rep. Peters, Sen. Padilla	San Diego's coastal area is lovely and can pay for its own lighting.
House	Soy-Enabled Rural Road Reconstruction	\$4 million	Fayette County, IA	Hinson	Thinly disguised farm subsidy.
House	Streetscape improvements	\$2.13 million	Downs, IL	Lahood	Cost of over \$1,700 per resident for the sake of the village's "business district."
House	Sewer expansion	\$4 million	Gretna, FL	Lawson	Cost of nearly \$3,000 per resident.
House	Wastewater system	\$2 million	Centertown, MO	Luetkemeyer	Cost of over \$7,000 per resident.
House	Rail station feasibility study	\$2 million	Chicago, IL	Rush	\$2 million just for a study.
House	Land for trail connector	\$2.7 million	Bethlehem, PA	Wild	For the Saucon Rail Trail. Local benefit, national cost.
House	Road resurfacing	\$4 million	Mulberry, AR	Womack	Cost of over \$2,500 per resident.
Senate	Affordable housing	\$5.1 million	Teller, AK	Murkowski	Cost of over \$20,000 per resident.
Senate	Transportation reconstruction	\$13.5 million	Russell, KS	Moran	Cost of over \$3,050 per resident.
Senate	Pond excavation	\$4.46 million	Caribou, ME	Collins	Fishy project that would help facilitate movement for aquatic life.
Senate	Water improvements	\$2.2 million	Penasco, NM	Heinrich	Cost of over \$4,600 per resident.
Senate	Moving police training facility	\$4 million	Hamilton County, OH	Brown	Niche parochial issue that does not rise to the level of federal involvement.

**SOURCES:** News release, Senate Committee on Appropriations, "Chairman Patrick Leahy Releases Fiscal Year 2023 Omnibus Appropriations Bill," December 20, 2022, <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/news/majority/chairman-patrick-leahy-d-vt-releases-fiscal-year-2023-omnibus-appropriations-bill> (accessed January 10, 2023); U.S. Census Bureau, "Tables," <https://data.census.gov/all> (accessed January 10, 2023).




TABLE 10

## Fiscal Year 2023 Community Development Earmarks: Woke Waste

Chamber	Item	Cost	Location	Sponsor(s)	Comments
Both	American LGBTQ+ Museum	\$3 million	New York, NY	Rep. Nadler, Sens. Schumer and Gillibrand	Housed at the New York Historical Society, which has \$182 million in assets.
Both	Three ethnic community projects	\$12 million	Seattle, WA	Rep. Adam Smith, Sen. Murray	The federal government should not be in the business of promoting ethnic identities.
House	John Lewis Center for Social Justice	\$4 million	Fisk University, TN	Cooper	Explicitly dedicated to promoting far-left, identity-obsessed ideology.
House	Loft LGBTQ+ Community Center	\$1.5 million	White Plains, NY	Jones	Already funded by corporations such as TD Bank and PepsiCo.
House	LGBT and gender non-conforming housing	\$750k	Albany, NY	Tonko	Housing projects should not be restricted to one narrow identity group.
Senate	Real Estate Strategy to Obtain Racial Equity	\$6.8 million	Wilmington, DE	Carper, Coons	Ideological project that already received \$26 million from "COVID" funds.

**SOURCES:** News release, Senate Committee on Appropriations, "Chairman Patrick Leahy Releases Fiscal Year 2023 Omnibus Appropriations Bill," December 20, 2022, <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/news/majority/chairman-patrick-leahy-d-vt-releases-fiscal-year-2023-omnibus-appropriations-bill> (accessed January 10, 2023); U.S. Census Bureau, "Tables," <https://data.census.gov/all> (accessed January 10, 2023).

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affordable areas are also experiencing severe housing inflation.<sup>40</sup> However, the main culprits behind housing affordability problems are not a lack of earmarks or government subsidies. Instead, the blame should lie with overly restrictive local regulations that have stifled badly needed housing construction in most major urban areas coupled with federally subsidized housing loans that pump excessive amounts of money into the sector.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, progressive Members of Congress are happy to use CDF earmarks to prop up their fellow travelers, as seen in the above table. A "racial equity" real estate project in Delaware is slated to net \$6.8 million on top of a previous \$26 million windfall from COVID-19 funds,<sup>42</sup> and several LBGT groups would receive federal largesse.

Using taxpayer funds to shower millions of dollars on activist groups and projects that promote divisive identity politics is not merely wasteful but also profoundly unjust. If private donors are interested in funding such projects, that would be their choice. However, federal taxpayers should not be forced to directly fund radical ideologues.

It is difficult to think of federal spending that is more deserving of elimination than the CDF, which is a poor use of national resources during

normal times and completely inexcusable at a time of skyrocketing debt and interest rates. Removing CDF earmarks would do a tremendous amount of good—but not as much as removing the CDF altogether.

## Similar Flaws in Other Earmarked Programs

While the programs and earmarks highlighted above represent the worst of the worst, additional programs with a high volume of earmarks also deserve scrutiny. The following programs represent billions of dollars per year in handouts for state and local government responsibilities, unfair and arbitrary subsidies, and inefficient federal micromanagement. They should be significantly reformed or eliminated.

**Department of Justice Grants for Local Policing.** Located in the Commerce subcommittee bill, the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) program and the Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant program act as slush funds to subsidize local police and anti-crime services. There should be no doubt that maintaining public safety is a core responsibility of local governments. However, providing haphazard subsidies for local police and anti-crime initiatives is a poor use of federal funds. It rewards localities for under-investing in public safety, enables initiatives with highly uneven (and sometimes negative) results, and adds a pointless layer of bureaucracy with the grant application and approval process.<sup>43</sup>

**Army Corps of Engineers.** The Army Corps, which is funded through the Energy subcommittee bill, manages water infrastructure such as locks, dams, and waterways. It has been a victim of significant mission creep, as lawmakers now primarily view the Army Corps as a vehicle for pork projects.<sup>44</sup> There is now a lengthy backlog of Army Corps projects, with legislators seeking credit for projects obtaining initial legislative approval while defunding older approvals languishing in the queue.<sup>45</sup> Projects often have little or nothing to do with maintaining nationally significant waterways and are burdened by federal red tape such as the Foreign Dredge Act.<sup>46</sup> The Army Corps requires significant reform, including the removal of inappropriate earmarks from both authorization and appropriation legislation.

**Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Preparedness Grants.** FEMA, which is funded through the Homeland Security subcommittee bill, manages federal involvement in disaster situations. Regrettably, the policy trend has been toward having the federal government take over funding for disaster preparedness nationwide, resulting in tremendous amounts of waste and dysfunction.<sup>47</sup> This is also a subsidy to disaster-prone regions, which perversely acts to encourage development in high-risk areas.

TABLE 11

## Fiscal Year 2023 Additional Earmarks

Chamber	Agency	Item	Cost	Location	Sponsor(s)	Comments
House	Commerce	Center for Equitable AI at Morgan State	\$2 million	Baltimore, MD	Ruppersberger	Injecting identity-obsessed “social justice” politics into an emerging field.
Senate	Commerce	Kelp Innovation Center	\$2.39 million	New Haven, CT	Blumenthal, Murphy	The main thing Congress innovates is new absurdities to subsidize.
Senate	Commerce	STEM diversity at Bowie State	\$1.5 million	Bowie, MD	Cardin, Van Hollen	It is almost impossible to count the number of “diversity in STEM” initiatives.
Senate	Commerce	Air quality equity study	\$2 million	Chicago, IL	Duckworth	The conclusion is predetermined: green energy subsidies for heavily minority areas.
House	Labor	TransLatin@	\$750,000	Los Angeles, CA	Gomez	“Workforce development programs and supportive services for Transgender and Gender nonconforming and Intersex (TGI) immigrant women.”
Senate	Labor	MLK Labor online hiring platform	\$2 million	Seattle, WA	Murray	AFL-CIO affiliate that expelled Seattle police officers in 2020 due to anti-police activism.
Senate	Health and Human Services	Health facilities and equipment for three universities	\$101 million	Missouri	Blunt	A lavish taxpayer-funded retirement gift for Sen. Blunt.
Senate	Health and Human Services	LGBT Center of NY facilities and equipment	\$856,000	New York, NY	Gillibrand, Schumer	Aggressively left-wing activist group that already receives funding from many top financial firms.
Senate	NASA	“Building a Pathway to Belonging” pilot project	\$500,000	Boston, MA	Markey, Warren	Premised on the idea that minorities feel excluded from a science museum in Boston.
Senate	Transportation	Air traffic control tower	\$40 million	Tulsa, OK	Inhofe	Huge handout for an airport that has only about one-tenth the passenger volume of top airports.

**SOURCES:** News release, Senate Committee on Appropriations, “Chairman Patrick Leahy Releases Fiscal Year 2023 Omnibus Appropriations Bill,” December 20, 2022, <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/news/majority/chairman-patrick-leahy-d-vt-releases-fiscal-year-2023-omnibus-appropriations-bill> (accessed January 10, 2023); U.S. Census Bureau, “Tables,” <https://data.census.gov/all> (accessed January 10, 2023).

The Emergency Operations Center and Pre-Disaster Mitigation grant programs are subject to a high number of appropriations earmarks and are an exercise in shifting local costs to the federal government.

**Department of Labor Job Training Programs.** Located in the Labor subcommittee bill, federal job-training programs are a perennial political favorite. Sadly, the track record of dozens of disparate federal training efforts has been lackluster, with program costs far exceeding earnings benefits for participants.<sup>48</sup> In some cases, workers who participate in federally funded training programs ultimately receive less compensation than peers who do not participate.<sup>49</sup> Since the purpose of federal job training programs is to increase employment and earnings among participants, failure to meaningfully help participants on average makes these programs wasteful. Earmarks for new local training initiatives are no more likely to succeed than previous failures. Congress should recognize that allocating billions of dollars per year to failing job training is throwing good money after bad and is something the nation can no longer afford.

**Airport Grants.** The federal government takes from the aviation sector through a tax on airline tickets and “gives back” through heavily micromanaged and regulated grants in the Transportation subcommittee bill.<sup>50</sup> The federal limit on Passenger Facility Charges, which airports use to pay for their own infrastructure needs, makes airports dependent on federal handouts.<sup>51</sup> Legislators seek to justify earmarks for airports as returning money that was originally taken from passengers by the federal ticket tax. However, airport earmarks still serve to perpetuate a broken status quo, with legislators pretending to be aviation saviors while keeping the sector in shackles.

## **Crimson Corruption and Green Mountain Greed: Taxpayer-Funded Retirement Gifts**

Senator Richard Shelby (R-AL) received over half a billion dollars in 2022 earmarks, including \$100 million for Mobile’s modest airport, over 10 times as much as any other airport in the country.<sup>52</sup> It is not a coincidence that Senator Shelby directed a massive amount of taxpayer resources while serving as the ranking Republican on the Senate Appropriations Committee.<sup>53</sup>

The story is much the same for FY 2023 earmarks. Senator Shelby retained the title of Top Porker by raking in \$666 million,<sup>54</sup> with several earmarks standing out as particularly egregious:

- The State of Alabama’s Port Authority, which covers rail and shipping infrastructure, received \$200 million. This does not even pretend to prioritize a significant project but is instead welfare for the state government.

- The Woolsey Finnell Bridge in Tuscaloosa received \$100 million for a replacement. Although it is an important bridge to the city, it is not an especially vital bridge for the region, let alone the country. Directing such a disproportionate share of federal funding to the project is raw favoritism and another handout to the state.
- The City of Mobile received a \$50 million “revolving loan fund” for “economic” projects. The terminology used is so broad that this should be seen as another slush fund.
- The small, low-traffic airports in Tuscaloosa and Abbeville received \$26 million and \$13 million, respectively, for runway extensions. The Abbeville project is especially wasteful, as Abbeville has a population of 2,500 and the nearest population center (Dothan) has its own airport.

The top Democrat recipient of FY 2023 earmarks was Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT), chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee.<sup>55</sup> Although Senator Leahy’s total earmark windfall is smaller than Senator Shelby’s, the State of Vermont received a much larger amount per person due to its tiny population. Vermont’s pork menu includes:

- A \$34 million earmark for Burlington’s airport, the largest airport earmark despite Burlington ranking 135th in passenger volume in 2021.<sup>56</sup>
- A project seeking to make it easier for Burlington residents to walk to a local market received \$12 million. Any amount would be an inappropriate use of federal funds, but \$12 million is an astronomical sum for such a seemingly unambitious endeavor.
- Two earmarks totaling \$2.35 million are for the Leahy Center for Lake Champlain. Senator Leahy directing public funds to an organization named in his honor is unseemly to say the least.

Senators Shelby and Leahy retired at the end of the congressional session. The Senators, both of whom spent over 35 years in the chamber, are set to receive comfortable pensions for the rest of their lives. They did not need a nine-figure amount of earmark spending for their states as an additional “gift” for their retirements, especially when so many American families are struggling to make ends meet in part because of excessive federal spending.<sup>57</sup>

TABLE 12

## Fiscal Year 2023 Senators Leahy and Shelby Earmarks

Program(s)	Item	Cost	Location	Sponsor	Comments
Energy Projects and NOAA	Leahy Center for Lake Champlain	\$2.35 million	Burlington, VT	Leahy	Leahy directing two earmarks to a center named after him is shameful.
Small Business Administration	Innovation hub	\$8 million	Burlington, VT	Leahy	The free market, not government, is the best source of “innovation.” Even in Vermont.
Higher education	University of Vermont	\$30 million	Burlington, VT	Leahy	Development of an Honors College at the university.
Higher education	University of Alabama	\$50 million	Tuscaloosa, AL	Shelby	Computing and data center for hydrological research.
Health resources	Health facilities and equipment	\$111 million	Alabama	Shelby	Earmarks for Spring Hill College and UAB Heersink.
Airport grants	Airport runway extension	\$13 million	Abbeville, AL	Shelby	Tiny airport in a small city of under 2,500 people.
Airport grants	Airport runway extension	\$26 million	Tuscaloosa, AL	Shelby	Low-traffic airport located about an hour’s drive from Birmingham’s airport.
Airport grants	Airport improvements	\$34 million	Burlington, VT	Leahy	Not a top 100 airport in terms of passengers, yet it receives the largest airport grant.
Highway infrastructure	Pedestrian project	\$12 million	Burlington, VT	Leahy	An incredible price tag for making it easier to walk to a local marketplace.
Highway infrastructure	Woolsey Finnell Bridge	\$100 million	Tuscaloosa, AL	Shelby	This project does not remotely merit such a huge federal contribution.
Community development	Port authority funding	\$200 million	Alabama	Shelby	Slush fund for rail and shipping projects. Duplicative of infrastructure programs.
Community development	Revolving loan fund	\$50 million	Mobile, AL	Shelby	A slush fund for Mobile to use on economic “improvements” and “development.”
Community development	Vermont Preservation Trust	\$10 million	Vermont	Leahy	A slush fund for “revitalization investments” in small towns.

**SOURCES:** News release, Senate Committee on Appropriations, “Chairman Patrick Leahy Releases Fiscal Year 2023 Omnibus Appropriations Bill,” December 20, 2022, <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/news/majority/chairman-patrick-leahy-d-vt-releases-fiscal-year-2023-omnibus-appropriations-bill> (accessed January 10, 2023); U.S. Census Bureau, “Tables,” <https://data.census.gov/all> (accessed January 10, 2023).

If Congress decides to finally take fiscal responsibility seriously, it should start at the top by ending the practice of allowing appropriators to give themselves plus-sized portions of earmarks.

### Responding to Standard Earmark Excuses

Proponents of the earmarking practice claim that earmarks are justified as a way for Congress to reassert its authority over spending and as a way around partisan gridlock.<sup>58</sup> However, there are many flaws with these lines of reasoning:

- The bulk of federal spending goes toward mandatory benefit programs that largely operate on autopilot and toward “zombie” programs whose authorizations have expired.<sup>59</sup> If legislators were truly concerned about the balance of power between the legislative and executive branches (rather than doling out political favors), they would make a concerted effort toward reining in mandatory and unauthorized spending. As if to emphasize the point, Congress recently chose to shift a substantial portion of Veterans Affairs spending from discretionary to mandatory in the Honoring Our PACT Act of 2022, reducing the control of future legislators over an important federal responsibility.<sup>60</sup>
- While legislators tend to be more familiar with their states and districts than federal bureaucrats are, this does not remotely prove that earmark spending is an absolute good. Federal elected officials are theoretically chosen to address federal issues based on local preferences, whereas state and local elected officials are chosen to directly address state and local issues. In addition to the many inefficiencies described earlier in the paper, federal earmarks for local projects represent federal infringement on state and local power and responsibility.<sup>61</sup> Even if local officials lobby for an earmark, in the process they become a subsidiary of the federal government, which is not a healthy development for local governance.
- The rise of earmarks coincided with a breakdown of the budget and appropriations process rather than an improvement. Congress has not passed all 12 appropriations bills on time since 1994, and the 2006 peak of earmarking activity only saw a single bill pass on time.<sup>62</sup> FY 2022 appropriations passed as a massive omnibus in March 2022—over five months late—despite the return of earmarks.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, FY 2023 appropriations missed the September 30 deadline.<sup>64</sup>
- To the extent that earmarks potentially make it easier to pass legislation, that does not mean they represent healthy democratic activity. Instead, earmarks are a textbook example of logrolling, a practice where many disparate items of spending (or tax loopholes) are bundled together to obtain majority support, even if many or most of the items would not receive majority support on their own.<sup>65</sup> Copious quantities of earmarks are an enabler of the unfocused,

overspending monstrosity that the federal government has devolved into and are a way to reward Members for maintaining a dysfunctional status quo.<sup>66</sup>

It is vital for proponents of a functional legislative branch and healthy democratic order to recognize that earmarks promote corrupt self-dealing, help to perpetuate harmful federal bloat, and undermine proper local governance that was a hallmark of American democracy at the time of the nation's founding.

## Conclusion

America faces a very real reckoning in the near future due to the federal government's unprecedented peacetime accumulation of debt and unfunded liabilities.<sup>67</sup> Members of Congress will face many difficult choices regarding benefit programs, tax levels, interest payments, and more over the next few years.

For the sake of America's future prosperity, legislators must start making responsible decisions. Getting rid of wasteful, corrupt, and inappropriate spending such as earmarks and hyper-local grant programs in the appropriations process would send a strong signal that Congress is finally ready to start doing the right thing.

**David A. Ditch** is a Policy Analyst in the Grover M. Hermann Center for the Federal Budget at The Heritage Foundation.



## Endnotes

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