



Opinion: Obama, Johnson part ways on earmark reform

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In modern politics, the term “earmark” has taken on a negative connotation. While campaigning, President Obama promised reform beyond the economic stimulus plan now before Congress.

South Dakota’s senior senator says Congress is the proper venue for directing federal cash to home-state projects. As a separate and equal branch of government, Congress has the duty to craft the budget, according to Sen. Tim Johnson, D-S.D.

“It’s a constitutionally guaranteed right of Congress to be able to control the purse strings,” Johnson spokeswoman Julianne Fisher said.

Search Johnson’s Web site — <http://johnson.senate.gov> — for “earmark,” and one finds not press statements railing against wasteful pork but a series of press releases announcing earmarks he has secured.

It’s not as if the money wouldn’t be spent if members of Congress didn’t take charge of that part of the budget, Johnson says. Instead, the decisions would be left up to federal employees — bureaucrats — who probably have never set foot in South Dakota. In March, Johnson wrote a column defending earmarks.

“An earmark moratorium won’t save the federal government any money. Without congressional guidance on where that money should be spent, the task is left to a faceless bureaucrat in Washington to direct money as they see fit. The money is still spent, but it will likely be directed towards New York rather than Rapid City,” Johnson wrote. “The word ‘earmark’ has become a symbol for over-spending and government waste when, in truth, congressionally-directed funding provides much needed resources to local communities when they are handled responsibly.”

Johnson favors transparency, the naming of names on earmark spending that Congress adopted last year. As demonstrated on his Web site, he has not been shy about announcing his own projects.

And one state’s wasteful pork barrel is another’s clean drinking water.

“Everybody thinks their earmark is OK and everybody else’s is not.” Fisher said. “There are people sitting in New York thinking, ‘Why are we bringing water to so few people?’”

She refers to South Dakota’s Mni Wconi water project, a massive \$450 million water-line construction begun two decades ago and still under way. The earmark-dependent Mni Wconi has brought fresh Missouri River drinking water to many of the ranchers and American Indian reservations of sparsely populated western South Dakota.

“I don’t consider clean drinking water ‘junk’ and refuse to stop fighting to get the taps running,” Johnson wrote last year.

He had similar words for money he’d secured for the Homestake science lab project in Lead, highway funding and money for economic development centers.

Meanwhile, South Dakota's Republican senator seems a bit more in sync with the new Democratic president on the earmark issue. While Obama has not set forth a specific reform plan, Sen. John Thune said he would support more transparency, and it should be harder to slip a spending project into an unrelated bill.

"Sen. Thune believes there needs to be an end of the practice of adding unrelated pet projects or expenditures to large pieces of legislation," said Thune spokeswoman Andi Fouberg. "There seems to be an attitude by some in Congress that a little more won't matter when it comes to large government expenditures; that isn't how family or small business budgets work and it shouldn't be how Washington works."

The state's lone member of the U.S. House takes the middle ground.

"I am a strong supporter of continued reform, increased accountability, and transparency when it comes to government spending and earmarks," said Rep. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin, D-S.D. "As we seek to bring even more openness to the process, we should also maintain the ability, in rural states like South Dakota, to advocate for critical local needs in a fair, ethical and transparent way. ... I have prioritized issues of openness and transparency in our budget process. In that role, I will continue to work to help ensure a process that cracks down on wasteful, misguided pork spending."

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