



Saying ‘no’ to pork one vote at a time: The story of recovering earmark addicts

By Jim Waters

He was for them before he was against them.

But when it comes to earmarks — spending items usually tucked into unrelated legislation by individual lawmakers — at least Minority Leader [Sen. Mitch McConnell](#), R-Ky., chose to flip-flop in the right direction.

McConnell faces a bigger challenge than most to go “cold turkey,” considering his [penchant for earmark requests](#). He got nearly \$2 million for a forage animal production laboratory in Lexington and nearly \$1 million each for a bikeway project at WKU and a lab researching animal waste management in Bowling Green. Those came last year in just one general spending bill.

His recent Senate floor statement announcing he would back an earmarks moratorium reminded me more of Linus losing his blanket than of some genuine desire to spend less on pork-barrel projects.

“I know the good that has come from the projects I have helped support throughout my state,” McConnell said in the statement.

I thought I might need a hankie.

But taxpayers? Not so teary-eyed, at least not according to the latest election results.

Most addicts — including those hooked on frivolously spending of taxpayer money — suffer withdrawal, often signaled by statements of justification. I’ve heard them frequently about earmarks:

“In the overall scheme of government spending, it’s a drop in the bucket.”

“If we don’t spend the money in Kentucky, someone else will.”

Yes, the premise holds water that in the overall scheme of spending and with a \$1.3-trillion deficit, cutting \$16.5 million worth of earmarks — less than half of 1 percent of federal discretionary spending — means little.

But ask an honest alcoholic and he or she will say: One drink isn’t a big deal to those who don’t struggle with alcohol. But for those who do, teetotaling is the only way to go to ensure the drinking doesn’t get out of control.

In the same way, a recovering addicted-to-spending politician must accept that while one earmark may not throw America off the economic precipice, it makes it easier to vote for the second one.

Citizens Against Government Waste reported that lawmakers spent \$20 billion on 10,160 earmark projects in 2009, compared with 546 such projects worth \$3.2 billion in 1991. Overall, nearly 110,000 earmarks worth \$307.8 billion made their way into spending bills since 1991.

Like one of McConnell's predecessor as Minority Leader, Sen. Everett Dirksen, R-Ill., supposedly told late-night talk show host Johnny Carson: "A billion here, a billion there, and pretty soon you're talking real money."

One sure sign that a politician should check into Spending Anonymous right away is when they begin to slur something along the lines of "We need these earmarks to revitalize a poor state like Kentucky."

However, as the coalition report notes: "West Virginia has received \$2.94 billion in pork since 1991 and still ranks 49th in the country in per capita income, making it hard to argue that pork spending does much for economic development."

Perhaps we just need a Spenders Anonymous meeting in Congress with a 12-step program for all the recovering spenders. I suggest the first step be something along the lines of what Sen. Jim DeMint, R-S.C., admitted when he agreed to the moratorium: "I'm a recovering earmarker."

"Hello, Jim!"

Second Step: When in doubt, addicted politicians should check with their "sponsors" — taxpayers who never get to change their minds about politicians using their hard-earned money to build roads to nowhere other than to the national poorhouse.

Take it from one of them: I've always been more than willing to help them "manage" Washington's waste.

They've just been too busy drinking at the public trough to ask.

— *Jim Waters is vice president of policy and communications for the Bluegrass Institute, Kentucky's free-market think tank. Reach him at jwaters@freedomkentucky.com. Read previously published columns at www.bipps.org.*