



April 23, 2004

Paving the Road with Pork

Facing a budget deficit of \$521 billion in 2005, legislators are poised to spend even more.

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With all the tough talk about reigning in federal spending and restoring fiscal responsibility to the federal government coming from Capitol Hill lately, it would seem legislators are serious about limiting the size of government and cutting wasteful spending in all ways possible. However, actions speak louder than words and lately, the actions have been expensive and wasteful.

President Bush has promised to veto any bill more costly than his six-year \$256 billion funding proposal in the 2005 budget, a 21 percent increase in transportation spending from TEA-21 passed in 1998. Apparently the Senate and the House have not taken the veto threat seriously. Recently, the Senate passed their version of the transportation bill, the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, and Efficient Transportation Equity Act of 2003 (S. 1072), which totaled \$318 billion. After initially supporting a \$375 billion bill, the House passed a "leaner" version of the bill (Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users, H.R. 3550) that only costs taxpayers \$275 billion, still \$19 billion more than the president's request. Apparently fiscal responsibility does not apply to transportation.

These bills are loaded with earmarks and "high priority projects." Citizens Against Government Waste, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization, reports the current House version of the bill includes 2,800 projects costing taxpayers \$11 billion, double the number of earmarks passed in the last transportation bill. Taxpayers for Common Sense, an independent watchdog agency for taxpayers, reports a state-by-state comparison of the number of earmarks and the value of the earmarks. California alone stands to benefit over \$1.2 billion with 366 earmarks. Alaska, the home state of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman Don Young (R-Alaska), stands to receive over \$540 million in pork on 29 special projects. South Dakota is the only state not to join the spending spree.

Making matters worse, the House bill contains a clause that will allow the bill to be reopened after the November elections. This provision allows Congress to increase the cost of this legislation by billions of dollars without being held to voter accountability. This provision is sure to be used as Chairman Young has told reporters, "I'm still going to work for additional improvements...This is a good bill but it can still be made better in Conference Committee." The Committee has estimated the final earmark pot will grow by another \$2 billion as the House and Senate meet in a joint conference committee to work out differences in their respective bills.

These bloated bills are loaded with projects that do little to address national transportation needs while diverting resources away from urgent problems such as congestion. However, these special projects do cater to special interests. The House bill includes, among other things: \$15 million to build a road to a gold mine in Alaska, \$10 million to construct a new interchange on I-85 at the request of BMW, \$8 million to replace the Edward N. Waldvogel viaduct in Ohio, \$4 million for transit improvements at Eastlake Stadium (a minor league baseball stadium), and \$250,000 to

construct the Crawford Museum of Transportation and Industry at Aviation High School in Cleveland, Ohio.

After H.R. 3550 passed the House by a 357-65 margin, U.S. Rep. Tom Petri (R-Wis), one of the four prime sponsors of HR 3550, spoke of how the bill provided "the very basic infrastructure that we needed for our economy to prosper." The highway bill stretches the definition of "basic infrastructure" of the economy to new heights. H.R. 3550 includes \$1.8 billion for bike paths, \$5 million for a parking garage in Bozeman, Montana, \$1.5 million for High Knob horse trails in Virginia, \$1 million for a parking lot in San Diego, California, \$1 million to restore and expand a maritime heritage site in Bristol, Rhode Island, and the list continues.

Both S. 1072 and H.R. 3550 betray the principle of limited government by increasing already ballooning government spending and leaving the possibility open for higher future taxes. The American taxpayer deserves better than politicians speaking of fiscal restraint while acting fiscally irresponsible. It is time for President Bush to end Congress's wasteful spending and veto the bill as promised. If not, Congress will continue to treat hard-earned taxpayer dollars as if they are their own year round Christmas fund.

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