

A GUIDE TO CONGRESSIONAL EARMARKS

What Are Congressional Earmarks?

An earmark is a provision in a federal spending bill that directs money to a specific project, organization, community, or institution — usually within a single congressional district or state. Unlike most federal funds, which are allocated through competitive grants or through agencies' internal processes, earmarks specifically designate that money be spent on a named purpose or project.

Since fiscal year 2022, earmarks have returned in a more transparent form known as “Congressionally Directed Spending” in the Senate and “Community Project Funding” in the House. Members of Congress submit requests for these targeted funds, which are included in the annual appropriations bills that fund the government.

A Brief History of Earmarks

Earmarks are not new — Congress directed funds to specific projects going back to the earliest years of the Republic. Over time, however, the practice became controversial:

- In the 2000s, earmark use surged, with some members securing millions of dollars for local projects that drew public criticism. High-profile scandals and scandals tied to corrupt behavior led both chambers to adopt policies restricting earmarks. By 2011, the House and Senate had instituted a moratorium on earmarks, effectively banning them for about a decade.
- In 2021, Congress reinstated them under new rules intended to increase transparency and accountability, reflecting the idea that elected representatives should have the ability to direct some funding — but with safeguards that were not present before the ban

What Earmarks are Used For

Earmarks can be used to fund a wide variety of projects, such as:

- Infrastructure improvements (roads, bridges, water systems)
- Community facilities (libraries, parks, community centers)
- Economic and workforce development
- Public safety and transportation enhancements (ambulances, fire trucks, etc)
- Research and innovation projects
- Health care or social services initiatives in local communities

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These are often one-time, project-specific allocations that respond to needs that local governments, nonprofits, or community partners have identified. Because earmarks are inserted directly by Members of Congress into spending bills, representatives can target funding to projects they and their constituents prioritize. This can make the federal budget more responsive to local needs.

How Earmarks Can *Benefit* Citizens

When done transparently and responsibly, earmarks can:

- Support Local Needs
 - Earmarks help communities access federal dollars for projects that might not fit into broader agency grant programs or competitive processes — especially small or urgent projects.
- Empower Local Representation
 - Earmarks allow local representatives — who know their districts best — to advocate for specific needs and priorities.
- Facilitate Legislative Deals
 - Congressional earmarks have historically been used to build bipartisan support for larger appropriations packages or other legislation by allowing Members to show direct benefit to their constituents.

How Earmarks Can Be *Misused*

Earmarks have a controversial history precisely because they can be mismanaged or abused:

- Wasteful Spending
 - Critics point out cases where money was directed to projects that had little public benefit or where costs vastly exceeded the value created — feeding public frustration about waste.
- Corruption and Ethical Risk
 - Before the 2011 moratorium, some Members of Congress engaged in unethical behavior tied to earmarks — seeking bribes or favors in exchange for directing funds toward specific interests.
- “Pork-Barrel” Politics
 - Earmarks are often labeled as “pork barrel” spending — federal dollars used to benefit a narrow set of people or a single district while the cost is shared by all taxpayers.

To address these concerns, the reinstated process includes transparency measures: Members must publicly disclose Community Project Funding requests online, certify they have no financial interest in recipients, and follow limits on eligible recipients and project types.

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Where Citizens Can Find Earmark Lists and Funding Information

If you want to see the most recent lists of earmarked or otherwise directed spending:

- U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations — Congressionally Directed Spending
 - This page includes links to lists of directed spending (earmarks) for the current fiscal year and previous years, including amounts and types of projects:
<https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/congressionally-directed-spending-requests>
- U.S. House Appropriations — FY26 Community Project Funding
 - The House maintains a list of Community Project Funding requests included in bills, organized by appropriations category: <https://appropriations.house.gov/fy26-member-requests/fy26-community-project-funding>
- USAspending.gov
 - This general federal spending database allows citizens to explore how federal funds — including directed spending — are distributed, offering a broader picture of government expenditures: <https://www.usaspending.gov/>

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