

Fly Emirates to
16 destinations in the Middle East.

Hello Tomorrow



POLITICO

Earmarks: GOP frosh face dilemma

By: [Kate Nocera and Adam Snider](#)
May 1, 2012 11:54 PM EDT

House Republican freshmen are figuring out that it's hard to hate Washington and need Washington at the same time.

Take New York Rep. Michael Grimm for example, who has lobbied for a revamping of the Bayonne Bridge that connects commuters to [New Jersey](#). Or New York Rep. Ann Marie Buerkle, who has said the "federal government can have real and legitimate impact on the economic health of a region by supporting improvements to local infrastructure" — as she pushed the Syracuse Connective Corridor [road project](#). And even Florida Rep. Allen West has touted a [\\$21 million grant](#) to help construct a second runway at the Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport.

That's not exactly a bunch of earmarking Big Government liberals trying to bring home the bacon.

But these earmark-like promotions reveal the serious tension between the conservative anti-government ideology that swept the freshmen into office and the political pressure to deliver the federal goods back home. Rookie lawmakers have revolted over cuts to mass transit that affect them on the home front while expressing sticker shock at the overall cost of the \$260 billion bill. In a different time, a highway bill would have been greased for passage with hundreds — if not thousands — of earmarks for highways, bridges and transit projects.

But the larger transportation bill never made it to the floor and a shorter, trimmed-down version of the bill the House did pass is now heading into conference committee where there are eight freshmen waiting to help out with negotiations. Their biggest concern now is: What is this going to do for us? That's not exactly the tune they were singing when they ran for office in 2010.

"When we went around to each of the freshmen to ask them what their main concerns were, a lot of those were more specific things to their district or specific highways or different things like that," said Rep. John Duncan (R-Tenn.).

Though many freshman Republicans pledged to abandon the funding for special projects, it turns out a lack of money for those kinds of projects ended up making a longer-term bill unworkable for members.

"You didn't have the hope of a process for local projects," said Rep. Randy Hultgren (R-Ill.), a freshman member on the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. "Really every project is local but there wasn't really anything laid out about how we were going to get there, how we were going to identify the money that we did have, which was going to be less than we had in the past."

"I really wish we could have passed something similar to [the long-term bill] with some changes to it," he added. "People just weren't convinced it was ultimately going to be beneficial for their districts."

The "ultimately beneficial for their districts" part is exactly what Republicans abandoned when they swept into office in 2010. The earmark ban has made it tough on members and leadership to get bigger pieces of legislation done, but Speaker John Boehner said the ban is a "positive step in the right direction" in the revamping of Congress.

"You know we've been through 16 months now with not one earmark. It's made my job a lot more difficult in terms of how to pass important legislation because there's no grease," he said on CNN's "State of the Union."

There's a now bubbling movement on both sides of the aisle to bring back earmarks.

Rep. Michele Bachmann (R-Minn.), founder of the Tea Party Caucus, has said earmarks shouldn't count when they're for transportation projects. And just last week, the Transportation panel's top Democrat, Nick Rahall of West Virginia, made a public plea that Chairman John Mica (R-Fla.) join him in writing a letter asking Boehner to bring back earmarks.

Some lawmakers say the highway bill failed for other reasons.

"I can't say that it failed because of a lack of earmarks," said Rep. Patrick Meehan (R-Pa.). "We still have to make choices about how to use our resources most effectively. I know that I had trouble getting to a yes vote when they decoupled mass transit from the highway fund. I see how mass transit is crucial to the economy of my region, and I think we have to make a sustained commitment to mass transit the same way we do all infrastructure."

Not only are congressional earmarks gone — lawmakers have handed over to the Obama administration the authority to make executive decisions on which projects to fund. Some lawmakers are left in a tough spot: publicly deriding the grant programs as "administrative earmarks" at the same time they're privately lobbying for some of the money to flow back to their district.

Most disappointing to the transportation community, though, is that the earmark ban hasn't changed the debate on the Hill. When Republicans took back the House in 2010 and banned earmarks, there were high hopes that the "me first" era of transportation policy was over. With local projects off the table, the thinking went, lawmakers will finally focus on a national transportation policy that benefits the entire country.

Freshman members like New Hampshire Rep. Frank Guinta ran on a pledge that he wouldn't ask for earmarks, telling the Union Leader: "Being a member of Congress today shouldn't be about bringing money back to your community or your state or your district. It needs to be about how do we get our economy back on track, how do we put ourselves in financial and fiscal control again."

But things didn't turn out that way: Politicians are still haggling over what it means for their home turf. They've replaced district earmark figures with complicated formulas to divvy up money among the states and programs with a small but targeted constituency. But the endgame is the same: What does it mean back home?

There are still conservative freshmen who say they still think a lack of earmarks is the best approach, even if it means a more painful legislative process.

“There’s no question that the lack of earmarks makes it more difficult to pass legislation, and that’s probably a good thing,” said Rep. Tim Scott (R-S.C.). “With an abundance of earmarks, more people are happy, but the American people get a bigger bill. The truth is while lawmaking is more painful and slower-moving without earmarks, it’s probably in the best interest of our country for the long term.”

And the back and forth over whether to earmark has not gone unnoticed by Democrats. During the House’s final transportation bill vote, Democrats offered an amendment that would have ended funding for two projects approved by previous Congresses. The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee then sent out press releases to 60 districts alerting voters their Republican member of Congress just “opposed ending two earmarks in the Surface Transportation Extension Act.”

“Having done nothing to strengthen the middle class, these tea party House Republicans are now digging the ditch even deeper — breaking promises they made to the voters of their districts. It turns out GOP really does stand for Get Our Pork,” DCCC spokesman Jesse Ferguson said.

© 2012 POLITICO LLC