

Herdt: Contrarian view: Earmarks are good

By Timm Herdt

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When the House of Representatives approved the Museum and Library Services Act of 2003, authorizing the expense of \$232 million to promote America's cultural heritage, the vote was 416-2.

It was co-sponsored by tea-party hero Jim DeMint, and then-Majority Leader John Boehner sang its praises on the House floor.

Once the decision was made to spend the money, who should have decided where to spend it?

Should the decisions have been made exclusively by a bureaucracy responding to grant applications dominated by highbrow museums in New York and Los Angeles? Or should elected representatives from the heartland been given a crack at earmarking some it for, say, a museum that celebrates the contributions of women in pioneering the American West?

If you've been paying any attention to the bluster over congressional earmarking in recent years, you know how those questions were resolved.

The earmark for a \$90,000 federal grant to the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame made its way into the Citizens Against Government Waste's "Pig Book," into the rhetoric of anti-earmark crusader John McCain, and into the simple-minded outrage of a lazy American media.

Such criticism, argue two Cal State Channel Islands political science professors in a new book, is misdirected.

Those who consider it wasteful spending for the government to support museums might reasonably rail against legislation authorizing the expenditure, says co-author Scott Frisch. But the practice of members of Congress earmarking where some of the money is spent dates to the founding of the country, is democratic and conforms to the constitutional intent of giving Congress exclusive power over the nation's purse.

Frisch and colleague Sean Kelly call their book "Cheese Factories on the Moon: Why Earmarks are Good for American Democracy."

The title is taken from former Texas Sen. Phil Gramm, who once mused that he thought it would be a very bad idea for the government to build a cheese factory on the moon, but that if a majority of Congress decided to do it he would want "the milk to

come from Texas cows.”

Frisch argues that the alternative to earmarks is to give the bureaucracy total control over how to dispense funds to implement programs approved by Congress.

“People arguing for the end of earmarks are saying, ‘Let’s give all the authority to a centralized executive branch,’” Frisch told me this week. “The centralized funding of government programs — I think the Soviet Union tried that without great result.”

Frisch, who has written extensively on how Congress functions, acknowledges that a decade ago the practice of earmarking exploded well beyond its historic norms. “There was a period when things got a little crazy,” he said.

But now, Frisch believes, the reforms may have gone too far. “Increasingly, the criticism of earmarks has been less and less fair,” he said.

He said he needs to look no farther than his own campus to make his point.

“We have a nursing simulation lab that everyone is very proud of,” he said. The lab was partly funded by an earmark obtained by a Ventura County congressman, Rep. Elton Gallegly, R-Simi Valley. It addresses a pressing statewide problem: a shortage of trained nurses.

But it’s possible a critic from Montana might look at it from afar and ask why the government is paying for college students to learn how to prevent dummies from getting bedsores.

One good thing about earmarks, the book argues, is that they allow national programs to be tailored to fit regional needs.

A Californian might wonder about an earmark to study how to handle hog waste, Frisch said, but everyone in North Carolina would understand why that’s a pressing need. A critic in Tennessee might guffaw at federal funding for a tattoo-removal program in Los Angeles, but Southern Californians who live with the effects of gang culture understand the value.

Some might call Frisch and Kelly contrarians, arguing as they do against a practice that conventional wisdom condemns.

But there are indications that the public agrees that members of Congress should play a role in directing federal funds to their communities.

A poll released this month by the Pew Research Center found that 53 percent of voters say they are more likely to vote for a candidate who “has a record of bringing government projects and money to your district.”

Frisch hopes the book comes to the attention of TV news producers, and that perhaps before they do their next outraged report on an earmark whose importance they dismissively belittle, they first “try to do a little reporting. In most cases, there’s a

real story behind it.”

— Timm Herdt is chief of The Star state bureau. His political blog “95 percent accurate*” is at <http://www.TimmHerd.com>.



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