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Pork or principle? Pork wins

By Jim Nowlan

If you saw a big wrong—but you gained a benefit for your community from the wrong, what would you do? Principle or benefit?

This is the dilemma Illinois state legislators and congressmen face when budgeting.

The wrong? At the state level, new and increased taxes were enacted in 2009 for a needed capital infrastructure bill for highways, university buildings, mass transit and the like. As part of the program, however, each legislator was offered several million dollars worth of local projects to dole out to grateful communities, local governments, schools, churches and VFWs.

In total, the projects amount to about \$1 billion for 3,800-plus projects, or about 20 projects per each of the state's 177 legislators. Just think of the ribbon-cuttings in the local papers, with the sponsoring lawmaker beaming for the cameras at each one.

Most of the projects are probably for worthwhile, if vague local purposes such as “general infrastructure.” Just about every community of any size is included, as are hundreds of small villages. Rock Island is to receive \$190,000 for “water main expansion and general infrastructure” and Moline is in line for the same amount (must have balance in awards between those sister cities) for “city hall renovations.”

Kankakee will receive \$150,000 for “infrastructure,” the same purpose for which Ottawa gets \$300,000.

Looking through the 180 pages(!) of listings of the projects, however, one wonders about grants to the Salem Christian Academy and many religious organizations and to several VFW posts for parking lot improvements. Then there are the grants to Masonic lodges, \$750,000 for the Muntu Dance Theatre, and \$100,000 to the Kwame Nkrumah Academy.

Each legislator developed his own strategy for disbursing the grant money. Some awarded scores of small \$20-50,000 grants, while others granted big amounts (in the millions) to a few projects.

Critics call the nearly 4,000 projects “pork”; recipients see them as precious truffles rooted out by lawmakers who worked hard to bring home the bacon (to continue the porcine metaphors). In fact, during the legislative session, legislators are told from on high, that is, by their leadership, how much money they have to work with. And the leaders generally want a list of projects pronto, even before members can evaluate them thoroughly.

In the parlance of Springfield, the projects are called “member initiatives,” though the initiative comes from the leaders.

In Washington, the same game is played annually, but the projects are called “earmarks.” In the minority, Republican members of Congress are caught in a web of cynicism. On the one hand, they vote against the budget shaped by the majority Democrats, characterizing it as so bloated with deficit spending as to sink the ship of state.

With the other hand, they apply to their leaders for earmarks to spread around their districts. The minority party members are allocated lesser amounts than the Democrats, yet still in the millions.

So, in Illinois you have new taxes on soft drinks and increased motor vehicle fees to fund the member initiatives. In Washington, the earmarks simply add to the frightful budget deficit.

If you were a member of the legislature or Congress, what would you do? Stand on the principle of budget discipline and refuse the grant money—while all your colleagues are taking theirs? Or, cave in to the game and take your handouts, helping communities and local governments in your district that have been bedeviling you for the grant money? (Most local groups are aware of the game and lobby for their share of the action.)

Pork wins. I don't know of a member in either Springfield or Washington who refuses the handouts, though I may have overlooked one here or there. And every local group that seeks the generally well-intended grants is also complicit in the game of blaming Springfield and Washington for the budget deficits, while at the same time contributing a bit to the fiscal problems.

Nowlan is a former Illinois legislator and state agency director. He is a senior fellow at the University of Illinois Institute of Government and Public Affairs.