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Fresno County officials stand against Nunes' call to end earmarks

By Michael Doyle / Bee Washington Bureau

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WASHINGTON -- Fresno County officials seeking \$17 million in federal aid for nine local projects say they are disappointed that one of their local congressmen is putting principle above pragmatism.

Local lawmakers usually endorse such requests without hesitation. But Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Visalia, says he will no longer seek federal earmarked funding for projects that haven't been previously authorized. He calls this a matter of principle. Some of his constituents call it a mistake.

"We don't have time to play the political game and stand on principle when we really need the money," Reedley City Council Member Scott Brockett said Monday.

Brockett is one of 34 Fresno-area representatives making the county's annual lobbying trek to Capitol Hill this week. These lobbying trips usually follow a standard script, at least some of which could be rewritten by Nunes' self-imposed earmark moratorium.

"Earmarks are still a way of life, no matter what the other high-level conversations may be," said Barbara Goodwin, executive director of the Council of Fresno County Governments.

Some of the Fresno County projects span several congressional districts and are supported by other Valley lawmakers, who could ensure that they get funded. The city of Reedley, however, is entirely within Nunes' district, and Brockett said he feared Nunes' unwillingness to support a bridge improvement earmark could eliminate any chance of getting federal funding.

Earmarks typically refer to specified line items in an overall appropriations bill. In a classic example, Fresno County representatives are asking for \$1.5 million in Justice Department funding to support a countywide anti-gang initiative dubbed "Never Give Up." The money would help pay for intelligence sharing, after-school programs, tattoo removals and other efforts targeting the 209 street and prison gangs identified in Fresno County.

The rest of the Fresno County wish list ranges from \$500,000 to rebuild Reedley's Manning Avenue bridge to \$3 million for completing construction of State Route 180 between Temperance and Academy avenues.

In some cases, Kerman Mayor Trinidad Rodriguez noted, Fresno County has already pledged its own money through the passage of the Measure C sales-tax measure.

"We need federal support," said James "Buzz" Burleson, chairman of the Economic Development Corp. Serving Fresno County. "It's only fair that the federal government participate in that project."

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LOCAL EARMARKS

Recent congressional earmarks have included:

\$267,000 for the Fresno Police Department to buy video cameras and mobile computers.

\$185,000 for curriculum development in Clovis.

\$123,000 to assist small schools serving Yosemite National Park employees.

\$146,000 for an electronic medical system at Tulare County hospitals.

\$156,000 for Saint Agnes Medical Center in Fresno to buy equipment.

Like other Valley counties, Fresno County officials presented a common legislative wish listed under the "One Voice" nickname meant to denote political unanimity.

The "One Voice" visits typically include distributing colorful briefing materials and meetings with local lawmakers who rarely need selling.

The Fresno County sessions in the Cannon House Office Building on Monday became a little discordant, then, when Nunes' representatives made clear the congressman's concern over earmarks.

Nunes is alone among San Joaquin Valley House members in shunning unauthorized earmarks.

"Until this process is reformed, it's not worth participating in," Nunes told The Bee last week.

Nunes maintains the 11,000-plus earmarks approved by the Democrat-controlled Congress last year were distributed unfairly, and often included unworthy projects. No San Joaquin Valley lawmaker serves on the House Appropriations Committee, whose members get the lion's share of earmarks.

Nunes and other House Republicans have pressed unsuccessfully for a one-year, congresswide moratorium on earmarks, a proposal that Democrats dismiss as political grandstanding.

The other San Joaquin Valley lawmakers generally agree earmarking needs reform, but they tend to support requests from local government representatives.

Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, said he didn't want to "unilaterally disarm" by failing to seek funding for local projects.

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