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## Projects Test Resolve on Earmarks

Republicans in Washington are eagerly promoting their promise to abstain from earmarks, saying the move is necessary to contain federal spending. But the pledge made on the campaign trail is proving more complicated in practice.

*By Cameron McWhirter And Naftali Bendavid*

SAVANNAH, Ga.—Congressional Republicans are eagerly promoting their promise to abstain from earmarks, saying the move is necessary to contain federal spending and mollify voters angry at Washington. But the pledge made on the campaign trail is proving more complicated in practice.



Photo by Stephen Morton A container ship heads upriver to the Port of Savannah, which is seeking \$105 million in federal funds to begin deepening its harbor.

Some senators' resolve is being tested as two of the nation's major ports, one here and another in Charleston, S.C., urgently seek funding to expand.

Port officials say federal dollars will be crucial next year so they can deepen their harbors to accommodate bigger ships after the Panama Canal is widened and reopens in 2014.

It isn't clear that can be done without earmarking—special funding that lawmakers request for projects in their home states.

The Savannah port is seeking \$105 million for the upcoming fiscal year to begin dredging the port, while Charleston wants \$400,000 for a feasibility study for its own deepening project. If the ports cannot receive the mega-ships, Savannah and Charleston officials say, the cargo will go to New York or Norfolk, Va., which they argue would be inefficient and deliver an economic blow to the Southeast, costing jobs.

Earmarks were denounced by conservative activists during the recent midterm election campaigns, and Republicans in both chambers banned them last month. But several GOP senators have suggested they'll make exceptions if they see fit, including three of the four from Georgia and South Carolina.

Spending on items such as ports, bridges and roads are included in the president's annual budget, which is then reviewed by congressional committees. It's at that point that lawmakers often go to a committee chairman to get their earmarked projects inserted. Individual projects could also be funded in free-standing bills, but that would be impractical, given how numerous such projects are.

The controversial nature of earmarks was highlighted Tuesday when the Senate voted 56-39 against expanding an earmark ban to the full chamber that was similar to the one adopted by Senate Republicans at a closed-door meeting Nov. 16.

Sen. Lindsey Graham (R., S.C.) supports the earmark ban but has vowed to earmark funds for the Charleston port if necessary. "I'm in a spot where I have to get the port deepened for economic reasons," he said.

Democrats from the region say the ban never made any sense. "Charleston is going to be dead in the water because of this short-sighted myopic view that seems to be controlling," said Rep. James Clyburn (D., S.C.).

Savannah, the second-busiest port on the East Coast after the Port of New York/New Jersey, has been pressing an application with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers since 1999 to dredge the Savannah River from its current 42-foot depth

at low tide to 48 feet. This month, the Corps recommended dredging to 47 feet. The cost has been estimated at about \$600 million—\$400 million of which would be sought in federal funds.

Anxious port officials have recruited Kasim Reed, the Democratic mayor of Atlanta and an ally of President Barack Obama, to push the administration for funding. Some Republicans had been concerned that their earmark ban would lead to a transfer of power over budgeting decisions to the president.

Curtis Foltz, executive director of the Georgia Ports Authority, said in an interview that he and other officials had visited Washington repeatedly to lobby the White House and the state's congressional delegation. Having no port for large ships in the Southeast would increase the cost of transporting imported and exported goods from one of the fastest-growing parts of the nation, he said.

"This is not infrastructure for a water park or a bicycle path," Mr. Foltz said. "This is infrastructure that is absolutely necessary for the nation."

Georgia's Republican senators are touting their opposition to earmarks but also suggesting they'll do whatever it takes for the port. "My position has consistently been, I'm going to support reform or total elimination of earmarks," said Sen. Saxby Chambliss (R., Ga.). "But if a project is vital to the economy and jobs of my state, I'm sent here by the people of my state to make sure their interests are looked after."

Sen. Johnny Isakson (R., Ga.), who also supported the ban, said he would "continue to fight for funding for projects such as the expansion of the Savannah port that is critical to my state and to U.S. trade."

Many senators are allowing themselves such wiggle room. Other Republicans oppose the ban outright and are not committed to abstaining from earmarks at all. Democrats, who have a majority in the Senate, have not adopted a ban.

In the House, the earmark ban may be more effective, since Republicans will control that chamber and say they won't advance any bill that includes such projects.

The Charleston port, like its counterpart in Savannah, is a major driver of its state's economy. Charleston officials are planning a new terminal by 2016 that will boost the port's container capacity by 50%. They also want to deepen the port—the East Coast's fourth-largest—by five feet to 50 feet.

Sen. Jim DeMint (R., S.C.), one of the Senate's foremost earmark opponents and the force behind the ban, does not intend to make an exception for Charleston, a stance that has attracted praise from fiscal conservatives but some heat at home. Mr. DeMint said he strongly supported the port, but that the earmark system had not helped it.

Port projects are handled by the Army Corps, whose budget is largely driven by earmarks. Mr. DeMint has proposed a merit-based system under which a commission would determine which Corps projects receive priority.

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