

OUR VIEW: Earmarks have no place in government

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If events of the past few days are any indication, the only real change we can expect out of Washington, D.C., is a few pennies in our pockets - if we're lucky.

Much of the 2007-08 presidential campaign was spent talking about change in the way government does things. It was all about reform with grandiose promises designed to make an opponent's ideas look bad. Obama and McCain had plenty to say.

Both candidates agreed Congress needed to change how it appropriated taxpayer money. At issue were the so-called earmarks members of Congress add to spending bills. Earmarks are allocations usually for a legislator's home district. They are in effect a reward for a yes vote.

Politicians love to rail against such pork-barrel politics but do little about it.

Such is the case with President Obama.

He plans to sign a \$410 billion spending bill just passed by Congress despite his distaste for earmarks. The bill contains more than 8,500 earmarks with a combined cost of \$7.7 billion. That's an average of nearly 16 pet projects per member of Congress.

The White House has spun the bill as a leftover from last year, and insisted there will be new guidelines for earmarks next year.

There's nothing leftover about earmarks. Either you allow them or you don't. Apparently Obama didn't want to change the earmark tradition right away.

The new earmarks are on top of a \$700 billion-plus bailout in December and a \$786 billion stimulus package in February. The latter largesse itself was filled with earmarks covering thousands of "shovel-ready" projects throughout the United States.

Earmarks have evolved almost into an art form - like the bridge to nowhere in Alaska or multi-million dollar community centers that serve few people or even the \$2.1 million for the Center for Grape Genetics in New York that appears on the current spending bill.

Earmarks would no longer exist if politicians truly wanted to reform the process. It's obvious they don't, and that's going to cost us.

- *Murf Raquet, for the editorial board*