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Editor's Note

How can the problem of pork-barrel spending be corrected?

by [Horace Johns*](#)

Nationwide, gas prices at the pump average more than \$4 a gallon. The national debt is over \$9 trillion. The federal government's long-term financial obligations — reflecting future Medicare and Social Security benefits for baby boomers — stands at \$57 trillion. We import more than we export, resulting in a significant balance-of-trade deficit. The economy stands on the edge of recession.

Despite these alarming conditions, Washington lawmakers have the unmitigated gall to continue to gouge the Treasury with pork-spending projects. Both senators and congressmen are guilty, although to their credit, Tennessee's Washington delegation is less culpable than that of many other states, though certainly not without some fault.

Earmarked, pork-barrel spending for special projects in various congressional districts across the country reached nearly \$29 billion in 2006. Although that figure has diminished since then, there are still roughly 11,000 earmarks annually at a cost of \$13 billion. For example, just before the last Christmas recess, Democrats and Republicans pumped 9,800 pet projects, costing \$10 billion, into the \$555 billion spending bill.

Pork spending behaves like a thief in the night. Lawmakers from both parties often slip pet projects into spending bills with little debate or even notice. Unfortunately, taxpayers often learn of these projects only after they have paid for them.

Pork spending, more often than not, is politically motivated. In essence, lawmakers are sticking it to the taxpayers to get projects for their districts or states, thereby greasing their reelection efforts. Thus, Tennesseans are being penalized and the national deficit increased so that some representative or senator from another state can look good to his or her constituents and get reelected.

While it is true that some of these projects have merit, many do not. Also, eliminating them will only make a small dent in reducing the national debt. However, any merit they

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have is overshadowed by the appearance of back-room dealing and corruption that gives Washington lobbyists and our lawmakers a bad reputation. Add to this the perception that Congress never gets anything done, and it is no wonder the image of Congress is at an all-time low.

How can this problem be corrected? Probably there is no single silver bullet. However, a constructive effort is underway. First, it is recommended that all members of Congress pledge a one-year moratorium on earmark requests. Second, legislation has been introduced creating an independent Earmark Reform Commission to recommend changes to the broken process. The 12-member bipartisan panel would consist of both Democratic and Republican lawmakers as well as noncongressional members. After six months of study, it would recommend — to the president and Congress — eliminating what it considers pork spending. Then Congress would have 60 days to act on the recommendations through legislation.

It is hoped that if Congress ignored the recommendations, fed-up taxpayers would show lawmakers their disgust in the next election.

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