

Published Monday | March 3, 2008

Universities depending on lucrative earmarks

BY JAKE THOMPSON

WORLD-HERALD BUREAU

WASHINGTON -- For all the bold talk in Congress and the White House about slashing budget earmarks, it's business as usual for Nebraska and Iowa universities seeking money for pet projects.

They are seeking tens of millions for projects they argue will serve a public good. And they are aided by professional lobbyists to help crack the complex, secretive earmarking system on Capitol Hill that gears up each March and runs through summer.

"Our priorities don't change based on federal policies or what is being said," said Matt Hammons, lobbyist and federal relations coordinator for the University of Nebraska system, based in Lincoln.

Iowa State University lobbyist Allison Rosenberg said her school's earmark requests advance science in a way that helps ISU, the state and the nation.

The heart of American innovation is university-based research," Rosenberg said.

Labeled "pork barrel" spending by critics, earmarks are items that lawmakers insert into federal spending bills that direct taxpayer dollars to specific institutions, private companies or other entities -- often with no public hearing and little debate.

The universities don't just lobby for earmarks. They also track and weigh in on the many federal policy issues that affect higher education.

U.S. Senate records show that since 2000, NU, ISU, Creighton University and the University of Iowa have spent a total of \$4.1 million on lobbying. That covers professional lobbyists' fees plus some university staff salaries, travel expenses and office costs.

NU has spent \$1.1 million on lobbying, with \$840,000 paid to a Washington lobbying firm and the rest for Hammons' office efforts. Creighton has paid \$1.1 million to a lobbying firm.

Iowa State has spent \$863,000 and Iowa \$1.1 million for their staff lobbying efforts.

No payments for lobbying are based on earmarks won. But the schools' returns on investment are impressive.

Since 1999, Congress has steered about \$144 million in earmarks for research and building projects to NU, about \$25 million to Creighton, \$55 million to Iowa and millions to ISU, where officials say they are unable to provide a specific figure.

The major universities in Nebraska and Iowa seek money for projects that undergo behind-the-scenes evaluation by their federal lawmakers and congressional spending committees.

Not all earmarks are as public. Some veteran lawmakers have slipped in controversial earmarks at the eleventh hour.

Former Rep. Randy "Duke" Cunningham of California resigned after it was revealed that he had accepted bribes from defense contractors he had helped with earmarks. Rep. Don Young, R-Alaska, was criticized for a \$315 million earmark to connect the city of Ketchikan with an island of 50 people, a project detractors derided as the "Bridge to Nowhere."

NU launched its latest earmarks bid in mid-January.

University officials handed Nebraska's five lawmakers a binder with 24 potential earmark projects for its campuses in Kearney, Lincoln and Omaha, including the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

This winter, Iowa State University President Gregory Geoffroy flew to Washington, D.C., to outline ISU's earmark priorities before about 15 staff members of Iowa lawmakers.

Creighton and the University of Iowa also are delivering wish lists to Washington.

Besides Hammons, NU has hired the Washington lobbying firm Van Scoyoc Associates, which specializes in university earmarks.

Van Scoyoc lobbyist Carolyn Fuller, who worked on appropriations requests for former Sen. Bob Kerrey, D-Neb., handles NU's policy concerns and earmark requests.

"I talk to everyone: member staffs, committee and subcommittee staffs, program officers and budget analysts in the departments and agencies, think tanks, people I know around town who are experts in a particular field, organizations that represent various interests, my colleagues here at work who are on the Hill and at the agencies on a daily basis as I am," Fuller said in an e-mail interview.

Up to 15 percent of her time is spent on Capitol Hill; the rest is used to gather data, make budget justifications, examine hearing records, talk with experts and review ideas and proposals

from faculty, she said.

She helps identify where, in the 13 bills Congress approves annually for discretionary spending, a specific earmark might be funded.

The House and Senate Appropriations Committees that control the bills and earmarks require extensive paperwork explaining each project. Fuller helps with the forms.

NU pays for its lobbying with private funds or interest income on investments, Hammons said. No state or federal tax dollars or tuition money is used.

Creighton uses university general funds to pay Cassidy & Associates, a Washington lobbying firm that pioneered university research earmarks more than three decades ago.

In recent years, Cassidy has helped Creighton obtain \$1.2 million for its nursing program, nearly \$600,000 for its legal clinic, \$750,000 for its health sciences complex and several million dollars for a Cuming Street improvement project.

"We felt the need of someone who knows the bureaucracy, knows federal funding and can provide help with the fairly massive amount of paperwork," said Fred Salzinger, Creighton's vice president for health sciences.

Concerning requests for earmarks, Rep. Lee Terry of Nebraska said he deals directly with top NU and Creighton officials, not the lobbyists.

But he said lobbyists help the universities and his office by cutting down on research time.

"It's very helpful when they come in and say 'We think we need this amount of dollars and it would fall under this budget,'" said Terry, who has asked for earmarks in the past, did not request them last year and hasn't decided whether he will this year.

Sen. Ben Nelson, a Senate Appropriations Committee member, meets individually with university leaders on earmark requests. So do Sen. Chuck Hagel and Reps. Jeff Fortenberry and Adrian Smith. All of the Nebraskans have staff who work with officials and lobbyists.

ISU's Rosenberg is a paid staff member who lives in the Washington area.

As is the case with Creighton, Iowa and Nebraska, ISU's earmark requests percolate up -- from faculty, to deans, to a vice president -- and they involve debate about the merits of each.

Rosenberg handles the paperwork required by Iowa lawmakers for all earmark requests and promotes ISU's funding agenda.

The U of I's lobbyist is based on campus in Iowa City. Derek Willard, head of government relations for the school, travels monthly to Washington to lobby federal agencies on policy and, during earmark season, to meet with Iowa congressmen and their staffs.

Ultimately, the lawmakers decide which projects to push, Willard said.

Because of rising pressure on Congress to go on an earmark diet, Rosenberg and Willard said their universities may offer leaner requests in the future.

"I do believe the amount and number will go down," Rosenberg said of all earmarks. "I believe there's a course correction going on."

