

WORLD-HERALD BUREAU

WASHINGTON - More than \$60 million for projects in Nebraska and \$113 million for Iowa, tucked into big federal spending bills, are hung up in Congress this holiday season and face an uncertain future with Democrats coming into power.

In limbo for Nebraska are \$250,000 for construction at the University of Nebraska Medical Center's Cancer Research Center in Omaha, \$250,000 for bioterrorism work at Creighton University and \$500,000 for construction and renovation at Girls and Boys Town in Omaha.

Bigger-ticket items in unfinished 2007 spending bills include: \$24 million for a new Army Reserve Center in Omaha, \$5 million to relocate Omaha's Naval and Marine Corps Reserve Center to Offutt Air Force Base and \$1 million for north Omaha's Charles Drew Health Center.

"Dust in the wind," Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., said of the projects. "They're gone."

In Iowa, \$32 million in agriculture-related spending is hanging, as is \$750,000 for the Pottawattamie County school district's preschool program, \$300,000 to develop affordable housing lots in Council Bluffs and \$2.4 million for a landing system at the Council Bluffs Municipal Airport.

When Congress returns for a lame duck session this week, outgoing GOP leaders are expected to pass a stopgap bill minus such special earmarks - what critics call

wasteful "pork barrel" spending - to keep the government running until early next year.

Republicans are dumping the earmark issue on Democrats, who take control of Congress in January.

House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi has said the first vote after she becomes speaker will be to require sponsors of earmarks to attach their names to each project. But Democrats aren't pushing for dramatic reductions in earmarks, although they're sensitive about the stigma attached to them.

Critics complain that the earmarks often are slipped into spending bills by individual lawmakers with little or no public debate.

The practice of earmarking has exploded in recent years, highlighting the relationship between lawmakers, lobbyists and their clients. Earmarks figured into the resignation of former Rep. Randy "Duke" Cunningham, R-Calif., who was convicted of bribery. Cunningham accepted \$2.4 million in bribes in exchange for earmarking millions of dollars for defense contractors.

But many members of Congress, and some members of the Nebraska and Iowa delegations, defend the practice. They say earmarks undergo internal debate within House and Senate committees and are requested by local officials. The money funds worthy projects back home, they say.

Before Thanksgiving, the Senate prepared to vote on a remaining batch of spending bills containing earmarks. Several Republicans opposed to earmarks threatened to offer dozens of amendments aiming to strike the spending item-by-item.

Among them were Sens. Jim DeMint, R-S.C., and Tom Coburn, R-Okla., who have fought earmarks since they were elected in 2004. Their protest prompted GOP leaders to push the decision to next year.

"It's the responsible thing to do and it shows that Republicans are ready to do the right thing for American taxpayers," DeMint said.

Sen. Chuck Hagel of Nebraska was one Republican who didn't like delaying action on the spending bills, saying it showed the type of leadership failure that cost Republicans their majority in Congress.

"Most Americans will be working during the month of December," he said. "So should Congress."

Ultimately, he said, some of Nebraska's earmarks will be approved. But Hagel objected to the practice of "stuffing undisclosed earmarks" into large catch-all legislation.

Over the years, he's worked with others in the Nebraska delegation to win earmarks that he says he can justify. Hagel opposes sending earmarked money directly to private companies but favors it for institutions and the general public good.

Earlier this year, Congress approved earmarks that sent more than \$20 million to Nebraska in defense-related spending for fiscal year 2007.

Of that amount, the NU Medical Center received about \$5.3 million for projects involving robotics, protective masks for bioterrorism incidents and to detect bioterrorism agents.

In last year's spending bills, Congress approved 9,963 earmarks totaling \$29 billion, triple the amounts of a decade ago.

Terry said he supports holding spending to 2006 levels, at least for now.

"Of course I will still resubmit these (earmarks) because they are very justified," he said.

Earmarks were an issue in Nebraska's U.S. Senate race this year between incumbent Sen. Ben Nelson, a Democrat, and GOP challenger Pete Ricketts.

Ricketts called for replacing earmarks with grants and attacked Nelson for seeking money for a parking lot at Omaha's Joslyn Art Museum and for a project that included a parking garage at Creighton University, a new Interstate interchange and other road projects.

Nelson said he supports earmarks as a way for elected lawmakers to help decide on worthwhile spending in their states, as opposed to actions by nameless government bureaucrats.

All five of Nebraska's federal lawmakers and their Iowa counterparts have fought for earmarks to help their states receive what they say is their fair share of the federal pie.

Now with Republicans heading into the minority, Nelson, who won handily over Ricketts, will rise to a new position that could help the state even more.

Next year, Nelson will be on the Senate Appropriations Committee, whose members influence which special projects are funded in the states.

Regardless of which party controls Congress, Nelson will continue to push on behalf of Nebraska "for projects that have been identified as priorities by Nebraska constituencies" and are approved within the budgeting process, said his spokesman, David DiMartino.

Says Tom Schatz, president of Citizens Against Government Waste: "It'll mean Nebraska will probably go up on our pork per capita list."

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