Poison pork: From Ketchikan to Kourijima

Pork-barrel politics is government spending intended to benefit constituents of a politician in return for his or her political support. The earliest example of this practice in U.S. history is thought to have been the Bonus Bill of 1817, introduced by South Carolina’s John Calhoun to construct highways. The relationship between pork and transportation infrastructure has remained strong ever since. Recently, however, the world’s two largest economies seem to be experiencing some buyer’s remorse.

On Aug. 9, President Bush signed the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act — A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU). Among the $286.4 billion authorized over six years for the nation’s surface transportation were 6,371 earmarks worth $24 billion. This reauthorization practice has become increasingly far-reaching. In 1982, there were only 10 earmarks, 152 in 1987, 538 in 1991 and 1,850 in 1998. Perhaps looking to change the menu, Rep. Don Young, R-Alaska, chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, described the bill as being stuffed “like a turkey.”

But Young certainly delivered for Alaska. For $231 million, the Knik Arm Bridge — to be named after Young — would connect Anchorage with Mat-Su Borough, an undeveloped site. For another $223 million, the Gravina Island Bridge ("The Bridge to Nowhere") would connect an island of 50 people with Ketchikan (population 8,002).

By September, the staggering cost of Hurricane Katrina — and embarrassing publicity — had some legislators reconsidering their recent largesse. Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, threatened to resign if the Senate diverted Gravina Island Bridge funds to rebuild the Katrina-damaged Interstate 10 bridge across Lake Pontchartrain.

Althought the motion failed, Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okl., addressed the perceived ludicrous nature of a $230 million earmark for 50 people. “Where there’s a ferry service already running every 15 to 30 minutes that takes seven minutes to cross, (this) is enough money to buy each one of them a Learjet,” he said. Trying to maintain the fiction of fiscal discipline, Congress removed the bridge earmarks last month — but the funds were still sent to Alaska.

Compared to the U.S., Japan is literally drowning in infrastructure. It has 83 airports and 133 “important” seaports. Although the Port of Kobe plays a decreasing role in international trade, $50 billion was spent to rebuild it after the 1995 earthquake — even though neighboring ports had ample capacity. The business failure of the $15 billion Kansai (Osaka) airport did not prevent recent construction of new airports in Nagoya ($7 billion, 80 miles away) and Kobe ($5 billion, 20 miles away.)

On Sept. 11, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi won a snap parliamentary election based on his economic reform crusade — the privatization of Japan Post. Koizumi seeks to change the routine overbuilding of infrastructure made possible by cheap capital from Japan Post. Interestingly, Japan has its own “bridge to nowhere.” A bridge to Kourijima Island (population 361) was recently completed for $250 million.

While Japan seems content to limit pork mainly to transportation infrastructure, the U.S. spreads pork liberally across interests. The recently passed 1,724-page energy bill provides $14.5 billion in tax breaks among hundreds of U.S. companies, with House Energy Committee Chairman Joe Barton, R-Texas, labeling it “a very balanced bill” that was “based on the free market with appropriate government oversight.” Meanwhile, the bill’s critics claim that government support for oil drilling is unnecessary when high energy prices are already generating record profits.

Homeland security is also a pork haven. Current funding guarantees each state 0.75 percent of available funds, so 40 percent of total funds are immediately consumed. Wyoming receives per-capita grants seven times greater than California’s.

Not everyone in Congress seeks to micromanage spending programs for local benefit. In 1997, Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., a leading opponent of pork, introduced legislation to require that all earmarks be paid for with money from each state’s share of the federal transportation trust fund, rather than from money taken from another state’s share. His proposal failed to generate support.

Transportation relies on an extensive network of infrastructure. Local initiatives do not always translate to national benefit. If America’s transportation industry is to continue delivering world-class performance, we must ensure that scarce resources are deployed for the maximum benefit of the entire system. That means the menu must change — pork can no longer be the main dish.

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