

Farr secures big-dollar earmarks in spending bill

By Kurtis Alexander

The \$410 billion spending bill in Congress this week may be taking heat for its pork, but it's finding friends as far away as California's Central Coast.

The bill, which funds the basic operations of the federal government, includes more than \$6 million for projects specific to Santa Cruz County, from pollution prevention in the Monterey Bay to rebuilding the levee in Watsonville to a new medical lab at Dominican Hospital.

Much of the money comes at the request of Rep. Sam Farr, D-Carmel, who sits on the powerful House Appropriations Committee and was among the biggest bread-winners in the pending legislation.

The omnibus bill contains more than \$7 billion in project money, commonly known as earmarks, which has been criticized by fiscal hawks like Sen. John McCain as wasteful and unsuited to the bill's operational intent. But others say the funding is essential.

"One doesn't want to build bridges to nowhere," said Eleanor Littman, executive director of the county's Health Improvement Partnership, referring to the Alaska project that's come to symbolize earmarks gone awry. "But no one thinks of their own project as a bridge to nowhere."

Littman says \$238,000 slated for her health coalition, inserted into the spending bill by Farr, will "build a bridge to local health care reform." The money, she explained, would expand medical coverage for uninsured children and help put medical records online.

The federal spending bill was passed in the House last week and is being debated in the Senate.

The Bio-Info-Nano Research and Development Institute, a collaboration between UC Santa Cruz and NASA, is also expected to receive funding through a \$1.8 million earmark by Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-San Francisco, and Rep. Mike Honda, D-San Jose.

Mike Isaacson, the dean of UCSC's Baskin School of Engineering, said the money would advance pioneering efforts in renewable energy, like wind and solar, and inspire technology that increases energy efficiency.

"We're basically going to put together demonstration projects that agencies or companies might not try yet because they're not proven," he said.

Nonprofit watchdog Taxpayers for Common Sense, in a report released this week, cited 8,570 earmarks worth \$7.7 billion in the federal spending bill.

The bulk of the earmarks for local projects was requested by Farr and include \$765,000 for design of the river levee along the Pajaro River, \$262,000 to help pay for the recently opened cardiovascular intervention lab at Dominican Hospital and \$400,000 for water quality improvement in Monterey Bay.

Farr's individual earmarks total \$8.3 million, the 35th highest among the 435 house members, according to the Taxpayers for Common Sense report. He requested other earmarks worth millions more in conjunction with other legislators.

Farr said Thursday that making sure federal tax dollars are spent locally is important.

The county's bus system is expected to be another local beneficiary. The bill includes \$475,000 for a "smart card" system aimed at increasing ridership, particularly among the poor, in the Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District.

"We would never have been a large enough community to qualify for this type of federal funding without Sam Farr," said Les White, Metro's general manager.