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Brevard reps dig for local earmarks

Posey, Kosmas post requests online in show of transparency

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WASHINGTON -- Their requests range from \$100,000 to install water and sewer lines along a 3-mile stretch of U.S. 1 in Volusia County, to \$10 million to expand the St. Johns Heritage Parkway in Melbourne.

Brevard County's two freshman U.S. House members have submitted more than four dozen funding requests for local projects to be included in next year's federal budget.

Rep. Bill Posey, R-Rockledge, and Rep. Suzanne Kosmas, D-New Smyrna Beach, whose district includes north Brevard, disclosed their requests on their Web sites as part of a new transparency requirement for House members.

The lawmakers said they received hundreds of funding requests from constituents, but adhered to specific criteria in deciding which to submit to the House Appropriations Committee.

Kosmas, who used transparency as a key issue in her successful campaign last year against former GOP Rep. Tom Feeney, posted all 40 funding requests and recommendations on her Web site Saturday evening.

She said she submitted only requests made on behalf of local governments and nonprofits. The projects also had to create jobs, be cost-effective or improve the quality of life for the community, she said.

"The transparency of what we're doing allows the public to recognize that these are things that are good for their community, that are requested by their community, and ultimately met the tests that we described," she said.

Posey posted his 15 funding requests, totaling about \$68.3 million, on his Web site Monday afternoon. Next year, he plans to posts all requests he receives from groups in his district, including those that he decides not to pursue.

"We always like to see more sunshine," said his spokesman, George Cecala.

Each public agency that asked Posey to request federal money for a project had to agree to match at least part of the amount awarded. They also had to agree to spend the money in the district and provide local benefits.

"These are all projects that have been thoroughly vetted, mostly by agencies that are requesting them," Cecala said.

The impending retirement of the space shuttle was a key issue for both Kosmas and Posey. Each submitted separate requests on behalf of the Brevard Workforce Development Board to help aerospace workers move into new jobs after the shuttle program closes. Posey requested \$1 million, and Kosmas asked for \$3 million.

Other Brevard-area requests include:

- \$10 million to begin construction on the expansion of the St. Johns Heritage Parkway. An additional \$10 million was requested by Posey for the parkway's south interchange, which will provide additional hurricane evacuation capacity.
- \$8 million requested by Posey for military tracking technology that helps soldiers locate targets before they directly enter combat.
- \$3 million requested by Kosmas for Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University to set up a research center in Central Florida, preferably at Kennedy Space Center, that would study weather patterns in active hurricanes.

Although not a specific funding request, Kosmas also asked that an additional \$2 billion be added to NASA's budget to minimize the five-year predicted gap in American spaceflight after the shuttle's retirement.

The House Appropriations Committee will consider all special requests -- called earmarks -- as committee members craft the dozen spending bills to keep federal agencies operating. The requests also have to make their way through the Senate, and the spending bills they're part of must be signed by the president.

Earmarks make up a tiny percentage of federal spending, but they remain controversial despite efforts to limit them and to make it easier for the public to see which lawmakers request which projects.

Earmarks have played a role in lobbying and campaign finance scandals. They're also criticized for being awarded based less on merit than on lawmakers' clout, including committee assignments or leadership posts, and whether a lawmaker belongs to the majority party in Congress or faces a competitive re-election.

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