Could a Federal Earmark Fund Your Next Project?

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What are federal earmarks?

Earmarks are one-time federal funds requested by members of Congress for specific projects. Unlike most grants, requests are submitted through a congressional office rather than directly to a state or federal agency.

Earmarks have two official names:

- **House of Representatives:** Community Project Funding (CPF)
- **Senate:** Congressionally Directed Spending (CDS)

Each chamber has its own rules, eligible project types, and deadlines. Funding is competitive and never guaranteed.

How does the process work?

1. **Prepare your project** – Define the need, cost, community benefits, and funding request.
2. **Submit a request** – Submit your request through a U.S. Senator's or Representative's application process.
3. **Congressional review** – The Representative or Senators select projects to recommend to their respective Appropriations Committees.
4. **Federal budget approval** – Congress decides which projects receive funding through federal spending legislation.
5. **Receive and manage funds** – If approved, work with the federal agency administering the funds to complete the agency's application, meet grant requirements, and access the award.

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The process can take a year or longer. Being selected by a congressional office does not guarantee funding.

Is your project a good candidate for an earmark?

Projects are generally stronger candidates when they meet most of these conditions:

- **Clear public need:** Does the project solve an important community problem?
- **Defined project:** Do you have a clear scope, estimated cost, and timeline?
- **Public benefit:** Will the project provide lasting benefits to the community?
- **Funding eligibility:** Does the project fit an eligible federal funding program?
- **Community support:** Can you show support through plans, resolutions, or partnerships?
- **Project readiness:** Can the project move forward within federal funding timelines?
- **Financial capacity:** Can the municipality provide any required match and manage federal funds?

What about planning and design? Engineering, design, and preconstruction activities may qualify for some earmarks. General studies and early feasibility work may be harder to fund. Ask congressional staff about eligibility and competitiveness.

Tips for a success

- **Start early.** Applications often open in winter or early spring.
- **Be specific.** Request funding for a clearly defined project or project phase.
- **Show local benefits.** Explain how the project improves public services, housing, safety, or resilience.

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- **Know your costs.** Have a realistic budget and identify other funding sources.
- **Plan for federal rules.** Matching funds, procurement, reporting, environmental review, and other requirements may apply.
- **Keep other options open.** Continue exploring grants, loans, and other funding.

How to apply in Vermont

Vermont municipalities may seek funding through all three members of Vermont's congressional delegation. Each office has its own application instructions and deadlines.

- **Senator Bernie Sanders:** Congressionally Directed Spending Requests
- **Senator Peter Welch:** Congressionally Directed Spending Requests
- **Representative Becca Balint:** Community Project Funding Requests

Before applying: Contact congressional staff to confirm project eligibility, available funding accounts, deadlines, and application requirements. Check each office's website for the current funding cycle.

When should you apply? Applications typically open early in the calendar year for the following federal fiscal year. Check each office's website for current deadlines, instructions, and eligibility requirements.

A Few Things to Keep in Mind

An earmark can be one part of a larger funding plan. It should not be the only funding source a municipality considers. Earmarks are highly competitive - a request should close out your funding package, not be your first step.

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Earmarks are not automatic grants. Approved projects must still meet federal agency requirements, which may include matching funds, reporting, procurement rules, and audits. Funds may take considerable time to become available.

Need help? VLCT's Ask a Project Pro service can help municipalities explore funding options and prepare projects for funding.

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