

Rep. John Campbell might hate pork, but some of his constituents think he's being rather pig-headed.

The Newport Beach Republican, a proud foe of congressional earmarks, is catching flak for a stubborn stance that local officials say has led him to abandon valuable projects.

Case in point: Upper Newport Bay, a vast estuary that, if not for a costly restoration effort, could fill up with sediment and become little more than a glorified meadow.

The \$46 million dredging project is on the verge of stalling because promised federal funding hasn't come through, despite pleas from local policymakers.

"I think it's frustrating that (Campbell) doesn't seem to make the distinction between some empty earmarks and something that's just critical," said Councilwoman Nancy Gardner.

Campbell says he does see a difference, but that he's taken a vow of chastity when it comes to earmarks, at least until the process is reformed to allow for greater transparency.

"That is a pledge I have taken, and one I will stand by," Campbell said.

Another Newport Beach complaint involves the increasingly shallow waters of Newport Harbor, which the city wants help dredging to prevent boaters from running aground.

"We respect Congressman Campbell's attempt to reform the earmarking process – he is to be admired for taking that on," said Dave Kiff, assistant city manager. "Unfortunately, it's not yet reformed – and funds are going elsewhere that should come here. So we're stuck fighting it out for projects that we think are pretty important, like Upper Newport Bay and (Newport Harbor) dredging."

Campbell, however, has little sympathy on that front. "This looks like something to help out wealthy owners of multi-million-dollar yachts," he said.

The second-term lawmaker has snagged earmarks before, delivering \$2.2 million for Upper Newport Bay dredging and another \$500,000 for water-quality improvements that benefited the bay.

But those were just a sample of the voluminous requests for earmarks. "I thought," Campbell recalls, "what am I, an ATM congressman?"

Now an anti-earmark crusader, Campbell is irritating not only local officials but also some

congressional colleagues.

In February, when he promoted a \$2.5 million bill to benefit a Dana Point desalination project, Republican colleagues pounced, seeking to tag him as a hypocrite even though the appropriation was to be publicly debated, unlike most earmarks.

Campbell admits that the nearly \$20 billion in annual earmarks is just a blip when it comes to the country's more than \$400 billion deficit. But because earmarks are usually attached to massive spending bills, they're also the "gateway drug to overspending," Campbell says, quoting Senate colleague Tom Coburn, R-Okla.

At the same time, Campbell's principles may cost more money in the short term, at least for Upper Bay dredging. Initially pegged at \$38 million, its price has ballooned partly because piecemeal federal funding has made work inefficient.

Campbell says that's a "legitimate" point, but not enough to derail his fight.

Luckily, Republican Rep. Ed Royce of Fullerton thinks he can keep the dredging alive. The prescription? A \$2 million earmark.