

Where do all those millions of dollars sent out by Congress go? This week we learned that \$30.8 million of them are coming to Orange County.

It's earmark time in Washington. And of course with that comes all the smirking about bridges to nowhere, research into the sex life of beetles and the development of Lobster dog biscuits. I kid you not.

But for every one of those goofball projects there are earmarks that lawmakers are proud enough of to feature in press releases and stand up for pictures with municipal officials as the money starts rolling in.

In Orange County our congressional delegation has some fundamental differences with each other about whether to even apply for earmarks. And some are more active than others in bringing the bacon the 3,000 miles from D.C. to O.C.

Rep. Loretta Sanchez, for example, had \$2.6 million in personal earmarks in the big spending bill the House passed this past week and the Senate is expected to clear shortly. But Rep. Ed Royce brought home less than a third as much — \$788,000.

Part of that is because Sanchez is part of the Democratic majority and you always get treated better when your party is in charge. But it's also because Royce is a tough sell when it comes to earmarks. A former co-chairman of the Pork Busters Coalition, the Fullerton Republican is real picky about what he's willing to go to bat for.

Royce did join in with Sanchez and Rep. Ken Calvert, R-Corona, in successfully getting a big chunk of money to come back this year. That's nearly \$2.9 million for dredging work in Upper Newport Bay. More about that later.

There were millions of dollars that several members of the delegation all requested. The biggest item they secured was \$14 million for continuing work on the Santa Ana flood control project.

There's one O.C. lawmaker who wants nothing to do with earmarks and has been trying to talk his fellow House members into scrapping the practice as well.

When Rep. John Campbell started this crusade against earmarks when he got to Congress in 2006, fewer than a dozen lawmakers would agree not to apply for such projects. Now he says the number is up to 50.

By the way, this is spending that should have been done last year but Congress and former President George W. Bush just couldn't play nice together so the Democratic majority decided to wait for a friendly president.

A little trivia. The word earmark dates back to the 1600s. That's when notches- called earmarks – were cut in the ears of sheep and cattle as a sign of ownership, like a brand.

The classic arguments in favor of bringing money home to the 435 congressional districts this way go like this:

First, It's only fair that taxpayers get back some of the money they pay in federal taxes in the form of something that will help them directly. Second, it's better to have House members who know what their districts need decide where this money should be spent instead of inside-the-Beltway bureaucrats. And third, the money is being spent for things that are needed and that will have national implications therefore it's OK to spend federal money.

Sanchez pointed to \$100,000 she got for the Fullerton Police Department to work with a local company on a new bullet proof vest that will allow officers to hang some of their heavy equipment on the vest rather than belts around their hips.

Sanchez said if this technology is successful, it could be used by police departments across the country and save departments money in disability payments for police officers who get back injuries because they're carrying too much weight on their hips.

Campbell doesn't buy it.

He says the federal government is flat out spending too much money and that if this company wants to develop a new product let it spend its own money. If it succeeds they'll get that development money back in the form of sales. And, he says, if a Boys and Girls Club needs to build a new facility it should seek private money.

"Do people in my district pay taxes so that I can then decide what charities I think are worthy to receive money?" Campbell asked.

Rep. Dana Rohrabacher, whose Orange County earmarks total almost \$1.9 million, said constituents have a way to tell their lawmakers they don't like their choice of projects: The ballot box.

"If I'm being a profligate," Rohrabacher said, his constituents will let him know. He called lawmakers who pledge not to solicit earmarks "grandstanders."

Lawmakers who support earmarks also point out that these amount to about one percent of federal spending. If you want to cut spending, they say, look to such entitlement programs as Medicare and Social Security. But that's for another time.

In Campbell's case, while his district is probably missing out on some money for certain projects, his colleagues ended up picking up his earmark slack.

The earmark for dredging upper Newport Bay is in Campbell's district. His predecessor, former Rep. Christopher Cox, would routinely ask for and get money for that project when he was in the GOP majority.

But Campbell hasn't. So Sanchez, Royce and Calvert teamed up to get that money. Calvert said projects like that and the Santa Ana River project are vital for all of Southern California and that's why he supports them.

President Barack Obama bragged at his joint congressional address on Tuesday that there were no earmarks in the stimulus bill. Technically speaking that's true because no single member's name is on any of the spending.

That's not to say that particular people didn't get items in the bill, such as Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, who got \$8 billion for high speed rail. Those dollars will be gotten competitively, administration officials said, but I'd bet that some of it ends up paying for the project that starts in Reid's state of Nevada. Of course, O.C. folks will be OK with that. The train line ends up at Disneyland.

Despite Campbell's efforts, it would be stunning if Congress completely did away with the earmarking process.