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Enough With the 'Monuments to Me'

Let's stop naming buildings after sitting politicians.

By WILLIAM MCGURN

Maybe it comes from a daily commute through the Frank R. Lautenberg Rail Station in Secaucus, named for New Jersey's senior senator. Maybe it comes from re-reading his original press release, which boasts that "the vast majority of funding for this station was secured as a result of Senator Lautenberg's work as Chairman and Ranking Member of the powerful Transportation Appropriations Subcommittee."

Either way, the combination of Beltway vanity and New Jersey public-transport inefficiency argues for a simple but long-overdue reform: no more taxpayer dollars for buildings, bridges, institutes or other public works named for a sitting U.S. congressman or senator.

Few would begrudge, say, the naming of a ship after a former president, or a park after a retired legislator known for a lifetime of exemplary service. Our modern representatives in Washington, however, are disinclined to wait for retirement or risk the judgment of history. So from sea to shining sea, they clutter our nation with such landmarks as the James E. Clyburn Pedestrian Overpass, the Thad Cochran U.S. Bankruptcy Courthouse, the Tom Harkin Global Communications Center, the C.W. Bill Young Marine Science Complex, John D. Dingell Drive—all named for current members of Congress.

That's just the tip of the bipartisan iceberg, usually effected through the skillful use of earmarks. Though no one beats the late Robert Byrd of West Virginia—with more than 30 public entities named after him while he was still in Congress—he has had many imitators. Airports are a particular favorite. Witness Mississippi's Trent Lott International Airport, Alaska's Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport, and Pennsylvania's vastly underused John Murtha Johnstown-Cambria County Airport.

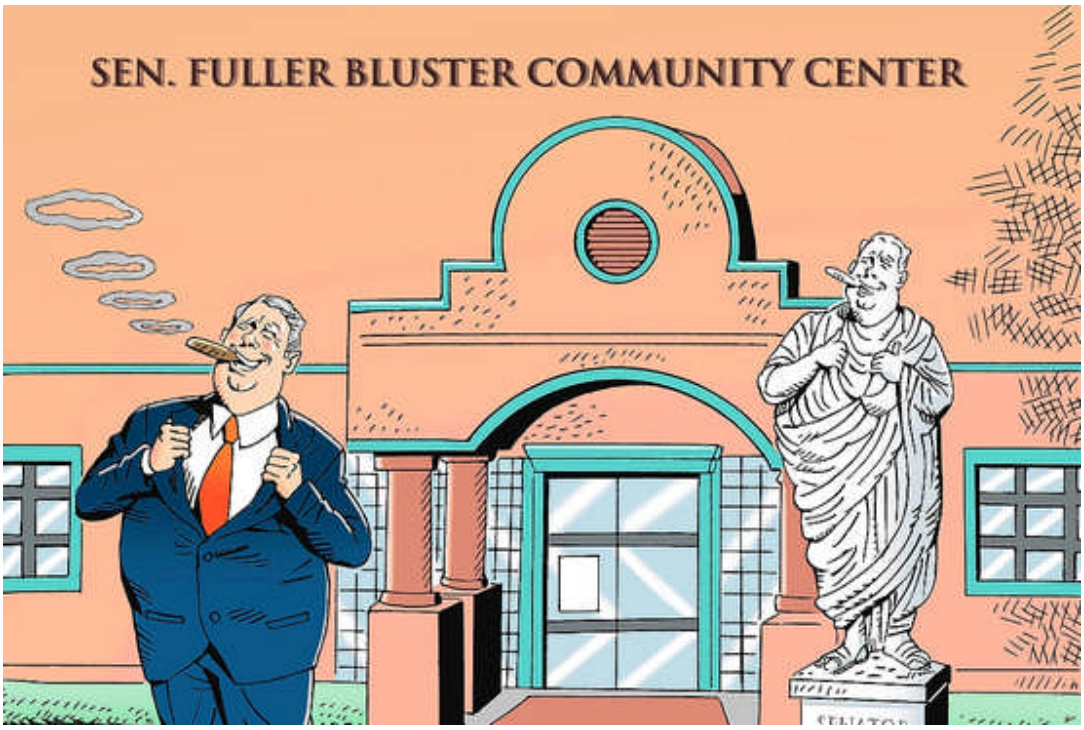
The good news is that the 112th Congress has an opportunity to end this practice. Back in 2008, Texas Republican Michael McCaul succeeded in getting an amendment forbidding these "monuments to me" in a Veterans Affairs appropriations bill. His plan is to reintroduce

legislation that would ban the practice altogether, which he hopes will be passed by both houses and signed into law by the president.

"These 'monuments to me' are among the most arrogant features of the earmark culture," says Mr. McCaul, a former prosecutor. "They contribute to both political corruption and excessive spending."

They do this in several ways. Like most earmarks, "monuments to me" grease the congressional way for fatter appropriations bills. They invite clear conflicts of interest (more about that later), even when federal funds are not used for the original naming. At the minimum, a public park or building named for an elected official provides a huge political advertisement for an incumbent—a campaign advantage paid for with the public's cash.

Martin Kozlowski



Politicians are getting scared. In June 2009, Maxine Waters (D., Calif.) and David Obey (D., Wis.), then-chairman of the powerful House Appropriations Committee, had a heated dispute over Ms. Waters's request for a million-dollar earmark for the Maxine Waters Employment Preparation Center in Los Angeles. The now-retired Mr. Obey said "No"—notwithstanding the existence of the David R. Obey Center for Health Sciences in Wausau, the result of a $20 million earmark.

Then there's Charlie Rangel (D., N.Y.). Leave aside the $1.9 million in tax dollars he's funneled to the Charles B. Rangel Center for Public Service at the City College of New York.

More troubling was the Ethics Committee's charge that Mr. Rangel had solicited contributions to the Rangel Center from corporations with interests before the powerful House Ways and Means Committee, which he chaired.

Before the midterm elections, Ohio Rep. John Boehner vowed to "outlaw" these monuments to me if Republicans won the House. There's no reason Democrats can't get on board too. After all, there are enough skeletons to go around. (See the Mitch McConnell Distance Learning Center in Lexington, Ky.) For Barack Obama, it's a chance to get in front of a spending reform that would make a nice applause line at tonight's State of the Union address.

In the Catholic church, men or women put forward for public commemoration—i.e., sainthood—must meet two daunting requirements. First, he or she must be dead. Second, there must be two miracles credited to his or her intervention. Americans are less demanding, and most would consider it miracle enough if we could get our congressmen and senators to ban using the public's dollars to fund things with their name on it, at least while they are in office.

Critics may claim such a ban is "symbolic." A symbolic move that addresses a clear abuse, however, builds public support for larger reform. And this reform would be one of those rare examples where Washington might offer an encouraging example of restraint to equally self-aggrandizing city and state politicians.

Mr. McCaul puts it well. "If we can't do the little, obvious things," he asks, "how are the people going to trust us on the big ones?"

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