

## CALLING A HALT

# Time for plain talk on Earmarks

■No 'bridges to nowhere' for me

By REP. MICHAEL MCCAUL

I'm a former federal prosecutor in the Public Integrity Section of the Department of Justice and a member of the House Ethics Committee, so holding all elected officials to the highest ethical standards is not new to me.

I was elected by the voters of my district to exercise common sense judgment on issues about which the average American feels Washington has become completely self-serving and tone-deaf. Repeated calls for someone to stand up and simply say enough is enough are outweighed by politicians' addiction to bringing home the federal bacon to curry re-election favor. This is the system we operate in now, and it is wrong.

Federal pork is addictive, and the first step to breaking any addiction is admitting you have a problem. One of the most undeniable confronting Congress is the earmark process. It is broken and breeds corruption. This is about as obvious to the American people as a two-ton pink elephant standing in their living room. They see with alarming clarity what politicians have refused to see, or admit: Members of Congress from both parties bear the responsibility for letting a legitimate process intended to directly fund worthy projects in their congressional districts with federal dollars spiral out of control into a case study in self-serving and wasteful government spending, or worse, criminal behavior.

Admitting this problem does not mean all earmarks are bad. In fact, most are legitimate, and submitted by politicians who earnestly want to help the largest number of people by funding meaningful and worthwhile requests. I voluntarily publish all of my earmark requests, and which requests are eventually funded, each year. However, their virtue does not excuse their ever-increasing number. The lack of transparency and accountability in the process

has bloated already unprecedented government spending and led to well publicized abuses like the infamous Alaskan "bridge to nowhere" and members of Congress accepting illegal contributions to line their own pockets instead of serving the American public. Enough is simply enough.

Since joining the House of Representatives in 2005, I have taken my responsibility to

my House Republican colleagues in co-sponsoring legislation calling for a temporary ban on earmarks until the system can be reformed and made more transparent.

The price of not funding worthy projects and programs that help improve the daily lives of my constituents is not insignificant, nor one I take lightly. It is, however, a small price to pay if it results in

to play the game as usual by requesting earmarks at the same time. I have chosen to lead by example. Along with 35 of my House colleagues, both Republican and Democrat, I will not be requesting earmarks until meaningful, common sense reforms are made.

What are these reforms?

They are, at a minimum, to allow every earmark request the opportunity of an up or down vote on the House floor and to be fully transparent as to its sponsor and benefactor. This is neither unrealistic nor unreasonable, except to those interests that have corrupted the process for personal and political gain.

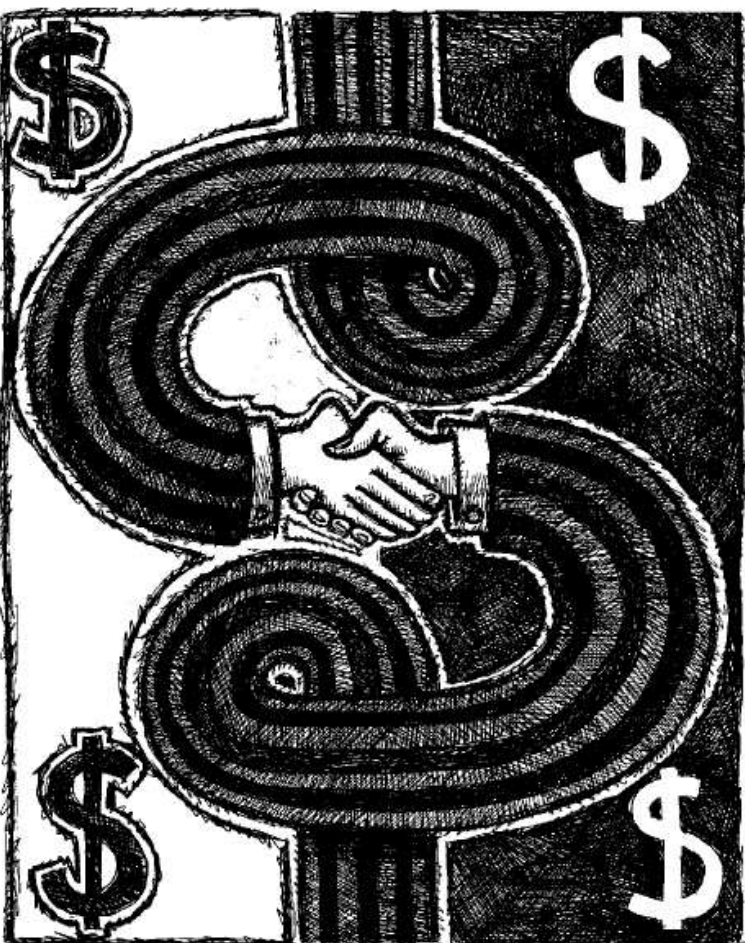
House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said to the Wall Street Journal in July 2006, "Personally, myself, I'd get rid of all of them. None of them is worth the skepticism, the cynicism the public has ... and the fiscal irresponsibility of it." Yet, now that she has the power to enact meaningful reforms, Pelosi has declined to do so.

She has declined to do so in the face of textbook wasteful spending like New York Rep. Charlie Rangel's "monument to me" earmark for the Rangel Center for Public Service and a \$39 million provision for the National Drug Intelligence Center in Johnstown, Pa., a duplicative center that has been accurately described as a "boondoggle."

This is the political doublespeak that earns Congress approval ratings at an all time low, and deservedly so.

Done properly, earmarks are an important tool for members of Congress to help direct federal funding to their districts. After all, elected representatives should be infinitely better qualified to make these decisions than a Washington bureaucrat 2,000 miles away in a bloated federal agency. But earmarks should only be used when Congress has the people's trust. That's why I've decided to stand on principle rather than join the crowd to secure "my share" of the pork.

*McCauley, a Republican, represents Texas' 10th U.S. Congressional District, which stretches from Western Harris County to the Austin area.*



safeguard the taxpayers' money seriously and worked hard to ensure the projects I supported are both legitimate and worthy of taxpayer funding. But because some members of Congress persist in abusing this solemn privilege for their own benefit and destroying the taxpayers' trust, even the legitimate requests must be halted until the process is reformed. For this reason, earlier this year I joined 158 of

restoring the public trust.

Interestingly, despite almost unanimous agreement on both sides of the aisle that sunlight is the best disinfectant, the majority leadership of the House of Representatives has refused to take up this bill.

It should surprise no one that in the hometown of wanting to have your cake and eat it too, many of my colleagues have called for a moratorium while continuing