

WALKING AROUND MONEY AND EARMARKS



DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT & CHANGE

By Barry Cassidy

I have been advocating for a loosening of the system statewide to bring back Walking Around Money (WAM). There was a time before the single application when the money was awarded without an application, but it was then refined to the Community Revitalization Program (CRP), which at least had a paper trail on how the money would be used.

People say that it is political pork, but I do not look at it that way because I apply for the competitive money and see the results of what happened when they did away with the CRP. Basically, what happens is that large sections of the grants no longer have a merit based system. Oh sure, there are some grants awarded on merit, but the merit money is getting a larger encroachment by the political set asides. I remember one year there was \$6 million competitive in the

Keystone Communities and \$3 million was taken off the top.

So, it was with interest when I was watching TV the other day and the president brought up bringing back federal earmarks. Everyone groaned except me. I think that would be a good idea, because it would make it clear who is getting what. I have received earmarks, and I can say that they can give a shot in the arm to an economic development program.

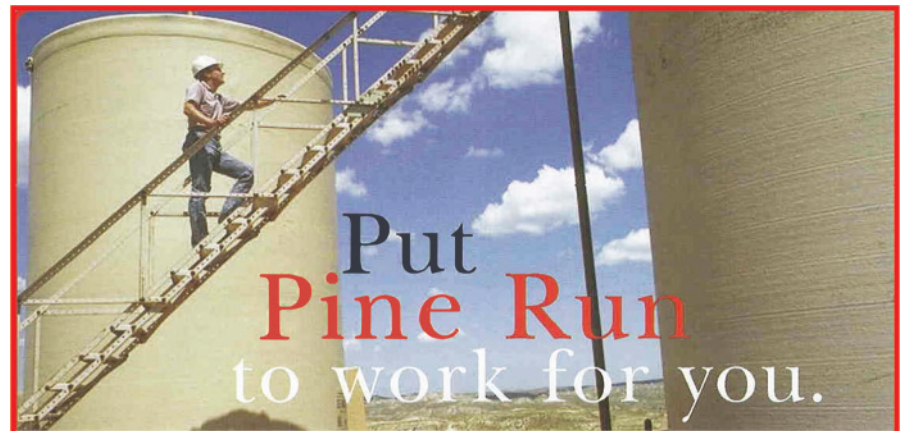
It is important that the government works for the people. I believe that CRPs and earmarks recapture tax dollars for certain local projects that need money. The Volunteer Fire Department, the good works of a homeless transition program, or repair of something not covered by a program. People sometimes do not realize that when you apply for a grant, there are guidelines that are used to set the parameters of the grant. A CRP grant includes the guidelines of your project, so it makes it easier to use. It is a custom grant so to speak.

On the federal side, it can bring money to a project that is a difference maker. We received a number of earmarks in Phoenixville, and I do not believe we got past the planning stage on any of them. In fact, I believe the local government decided not to pursue an earmark Congressman Jim Gerlach secured for streetscape improvements. I think there was some earmark money for a number of regional projects, like the Schuylkill Valley Metro, that never happened.

These kinds of grants are difference makers to a community, and lead to quick and lasting change, just because of the sheer scope of the proposal. It lets someone dream about a project, and put some numbers and logic to it, and maybe do something spectacular.

On the other hand, the grants done with competitive federal money need to meet a national priority or limited scope activities.

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This creates a more "top down" approach, which limits creativity and ingenuity. I am not saying it is all cookie cutter, but I am saying that guidelines that are created by the allocation are much better for the project.

But all the creativity aside, the real benefit from a statewide CRP is the fact that it is bottom up funding. There are local needs that have to be addressed, and who better to allocate dollars for those needs than the state representative and the state senator who have contact with the people? This kind of program provides a recapture of tax dollars that is a direct return to the neighborhoods. I believe that it is important for the communities. I also believe it promotes responsive government — Responsive to the needs of the locals, and not a bureaucrat's interpretation of what is appropriate or in vogue.

It is just as important to keep politics out of the merit money. It should be that if you have the best project, you score the highest, and you would get the money. Now it is more a political decision as to how the money is divided. To people like me, who have been working these programs since the Thornburg administra-

tion, I have seen it swing back and forth. I think the most merit-oriented administration was the Ridge Administration. They were looking for results, and it really did not matter much who you were but more what you did.

If you look at it, as your money goes to the state each year in taxes and everyone gets the benefit of some budget items like schools and public health, there are still gaps in local projects that should be able to be funded through the state in each of the political jurisdictions. The jurisdictions are based on population, and even though the geographic spatial alignment may be a little exaggerated, they are all pretty much equal.

A benefit of keeping politics out of the merit money should be the highest priority for everyone in elected office. It is the integrity of the system. Trying to come up with a thinly veiled system where half of a budget year's appropriation for downtown development money is taken off the top really is not acceptable.

Barry Cassidy is a freelance grant and economic development consultant. He can be reached at barrycassidy@comcast.net.