



Almost 13 years ago, Rep. David McIntosh, R-Ind., directed \$375,000 in federal funding "to improve State Road 31" in Columbus, Ind., a city at the edge of his district.

The McIntosh "earmark" seemed routine at the time, like almost 2,000 other congressional pet projects that lawmakers inserted into the 1998 highway bill. But there was a problem: "There is no State Road 31 that travels through Columbus, only U.S. 31," says Will Wingfield, a spokesman for the Indiana Department of Transportation.

The error hurt all of Indiana and has wrapped the earmark in red tape to this day. The money not only remains unspent, but because Congress counts money earmarked for highway projects against a state's share of federal gas tax revenue, the amount of the earmark reduced what Indiana would have received in federal funding — almost dollar for dollar.

McIntosh's botched attempt at earmarking is one of more than 7,374 congressionally directed highway projects in which at least some money that lawmakers set aside remains unspent, a USA TODAY analysis of state and federal records shows. In at least 3,649 of those earmarks, not a single dollar has gone toward its intended purpose, sometimes because of simple, sloppy mistakes, USA TODAY found.

The problem is so pervasive that almost 1 in 3 highway dollars earmarked since 1991 — about \$13 billion — remains unspent, federal data show. "We call them orphan earmarks," says Michael Covington of the South Carolina Department of Transportation. "They don't have a home."

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