

## Senators Pushing Plenty of Pork Projects Through Taxpayer-Funded Earmarks

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By Rick Brundrett - The Nerve

**Big:** 1079. Senators want to spend nearly \$108 million next fiscal year on dozens of pet projects by funneling the money through state agencies that typically didn't request the public dollars.

More than half of the \$107.9 million in labeled earmarks for fiscal year 2022, which starts July 1, would be spent collectively on a new Greenville convention center, renovations to the Columbia Convention Center and Sumter Opera House, and unspecified infrastructure projects in Spartanburg, according to an earmark list released under a new Senate rule requiring public disclosure.

The Nerve for years has [reported](#) about Senate and House earmarks – and the lack of transparency and public input on the spending requests.

Under Senate and House rules, earmarks are funding requests for specific programs or projects that didn't originate with a written agency budget request, or weren't included in the prior fiscal year's state appropriations.

Earmarks usually are funded with state surplus revenues – money that could be returned to taxpayers. Senators this week are debating a proposed \$31.8 billion total state budget for next fiscal year, which includes state, federal and “other” funds.

Despite the COVID-19 outbreak that first hit South Carolina more than a year ago and pushed up unemployment rates with government-imposed shutdowns, about \$1.3 billion in state surplus revenues – not including \$176 million in the state's capital reserve fund – are available to spend in fiscal 2022, according to a budget version passed by the Senate Finance Committee.

The Nerve's review of the Senate earmark list for next fiscal year found that 31 of the state's 46 senators, along with Senate Finance subcommittees, proposed a total of 90 earmarks. Below are the top-four most expensive earmarks, along with the senators who sponsored them:

- \$19 million through the S.C. Arts Commission for a new convention center in downtown Greenville, identified in the earmark list as the “Greenville Cultural and Arts Center.” Sponsor: Sen. Ross Turner, R-Greenville.
- \$19 million through the S.C. Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism (PRT) for renovating the Columbia Convention Center. Sponsors: Sens. Darrell Jackson and Dick Harpootlian, both Richland County Democrats.
- \$15 million through the Arts Commission for renovating the Sumter Opera House. Sponsors: Sens. Hugh Leatherman, R-Florence; Thomas McElveen, D-Sumter; Kevin Johnson, D-Clarendon.
- \$12 million through PRT for unspecified infrastructure projects in downtown Spartanburg. Sponsors: Sens. Scott Talley, R-Spartanburg; Harvey Peeler, R-Cherokee; Shane Martin, R-

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The other 86 earmarks ranged from \$8,000 to nearly \$5.4 million, to be funneled through 21 state agencies for various state, local or nonprofit programs or projects, The Nerve's review found.

The Nerve on Tuesday left written or phone messages for Leatherman, who is the longtime Senate Finance Committee chairman; Peeler, who is the Senate president; McElveen; Talley; Turner; and Harpootlian seeking comment on their earmark requests. No responses were provided by publication of this story; Harpootlian initially said he couldn't comment at the time because he was tied up with Senate business.

Outside of 11 Senate Finance subcommittee earmark requests, Sen. Karl Allen, D-Greenville, led all senators in the total number of sponsored or co-sponsored requests with 8, followed by Sens. Jackson (7); Michael Gambrell, R-Anderson, (6); Kevin Johnson (5); Leatherman (5); Gerald Malloy, D-Darlington, (5); and Katrina Shealy, R-Lexington (5), The Nerve's review found.

The Nerve's review also found that 22 earmarks totaling \$41.5 million would flow through PRT, which led all "pass-through" state agencies in the number and collective amount of earmarks on the Senate's list. Five earmarks totaling \$35.1 million – the second-highest overall amount – would be funneled through the Arts Commission.

With the earmarks, the total fiscal 2022 budgets for PRT and the Arts Commission would be \$238.1 million and \$44.4 million, respectively, under the Senate Finance Committee's state budget version, records show. In comparison, the earlier-passed House budget version calls for \$146.3 million and \$7.3 million for PRT and the Arts Commission, respectively.

PRT spokeswoman Samantha Queen in a written response this morning said the Senate's earmarks were "not included in our budget request," adding when asked about the agency's position on the earmarks, "We are responsible for administering the budget as directed by the South Carolina Legislature and Governor."

In an email response Tuesday, Arts Commission spokesman Jason Rapp said the commission requested none of the Senate's earmarks and was "not contacted to discuss any requests."

"Our agency does not take a position on any of these requests, but we will readily comply with any funding disbursements directed through it," he said.

## Pricey projects

The Nerve in January [reported](#) that Gov. Henry McMaster requested \$19 million in his proposed nearly \$30.8 billion state budget for next fiscal year for the planned convention center in downtown Greenville – the subject of Sen. Turner's earmark – though Rapp at the time confirmed that the Arts Commission didn't formally request the funds.

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Two years ago, [The Nerve revealed](#) that, under a House earmark, \$5 million would flow through the Arts Commission to help build the proposed center, which, according to earmark co-sponsor Rep. Bruce Bannister, R-Greenville, would house a large art collection that had been displayed at the private Bob Jones University. At the time, the total estimated cost of the project was about \$320 million, Bannister said.

The House adopted a shorter earmark list for fiscal 2022 compared to the Senate's list, though it was working earlier this year with smaller state revenue projections.

The Nerve also has reported previously about other projects on the Senate's earmark list, including, for example, the proposed Sumter Opera House renovation. The Nerve last year [revealed](#) that House Ways and Means Committee chairman Murrell Smith, R-Sumter, and Rep. David Weeks, D-Sumter, requested a \$7.5 million earmark to renovate the opera house, where many city departments also are located.

Smith at the time said Sumter city mayor Joe McElveen, who is the father of Sen. McElveen and a former state House member, and other city representatives met with McMaster to request funding for the opera house, though he added the mayor's son and other lawmakers weren't involved then in those discussions.

Any differences between the adopted House and Senate state budget versions for next fiscal year are expected to be worked out in a joint conference committee. McMaster will consider whether to issue any budget vetoes after the Legislature passes its final version.

The Nerve repeatedly has pointed out that lawmakers have ignored a longstanding state law requiring that the legislative budget-writing committees – Senate Finance and House Ways and Means committees – hold joint public hearings on the governor's proposed budget version at the beginning of the budget process. A House bill that would repeal the law is before the Senate Finance Committee.

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