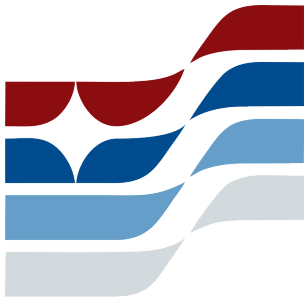




SMI INSIGHT

FROM CONCEPT TO CAPABILITY

A GUIDE TO COMMUNITY PROJECT FUNDING FOR UNIVERSITIES AND NONPROFITS

By Karlee Popken, Vice President

KEY POINTS

- Congressional earmarks are project-specific funding requests submitted by Members of Congress, not general grant applications submitted directly to federal agencies.
- Only certain appropriations accounts are open to earmark requests each year, and eligibility rules can differ significantly between the House and Senate.
- Universities and nonprofits should begin preparing earmark requests early, because successful submissions require a clear project scope, evidence of a community benefit, credible cost estimates, and alignment with an eligible account.
- The process is highly competitive and transparent: requests are publicly disclosed, for-profit entities are generally ineligible, and funded projects remain subject to federal award requirements.
- Account selection matters. A strong project may fail if it is submitted through the wrong subcommittee or account.

For universities and nonprofit organizations, congressionally directed spending can be an important – but often misunderstood – pathway to federal support. These requests, commonly referred to as “earmarks,” allow Members of Congress to request targeted funding for specific projects in their states or districts.

Unlike traditional competitive grant programs, earmarks are not open-ended opportunities for any project in any federal account. They are limited by rules established by each chamber’s appropriations committee and must align with the sponsoring Member’s priorities, public disclosure requirements, and eligible accounts. For nonprofits and universities, understanding this process – including its restrictions – is critical to identifying promising opportunities.

What Are Congressional Earmarks?

At a basic level, an earmark is a congressional request for a specific amount of federal funding for a specific project, recipient, and location. In the Senate, these requests are generally referred to as Congressionally Directed Spending, or CDS. In the House, they are generally referred to as Community Project Funding, or CPF. Although the terminology differs, the core concept is the same: a Member of Congress requests funding in an appropriations bill for a defined local, regional, or institutional priority.

Earmarks returned to the appropriations process in 2021 after a decade-long moratorium. Since then, Congress has maintained an earmark process with public disclosure requirements, financial-interest certifications, limits on the total share of discretionary spending that may be directed to earmarks, and restrictions on eligible recipients.

For mission-driven organizations, earmarks can help launch or expand projects that are important to a community but may not fit neatly within a traditional competitive grant program. To be compelling, however, the request must be framed around public purpose, not simply institutional need.

The Process: From Project Idea to Federal Award

The earmark process typically begins months before congressional deadlines. Organizations identify a project, confirm that the recipient and project type are potentially eligible, prepare a concise request package, and submit that package to one or more congressional offices. Each Member office sets its own internal deadlines, forms, and selection process, often well before the Appropriations Committees’ own deadlines.

If a congressional office chooses to submit the request, the project then moves through the appropriations process. It may be included in the initial House and/or Senate bill, revised during committee consideration, and attached – or excluded – from the final bill. Notably, when Congress enacts a full-year Continuing Resolution rather than new appropriations bills, earmarks are generally not included (learn more about [Continuing Resolutions](#)).

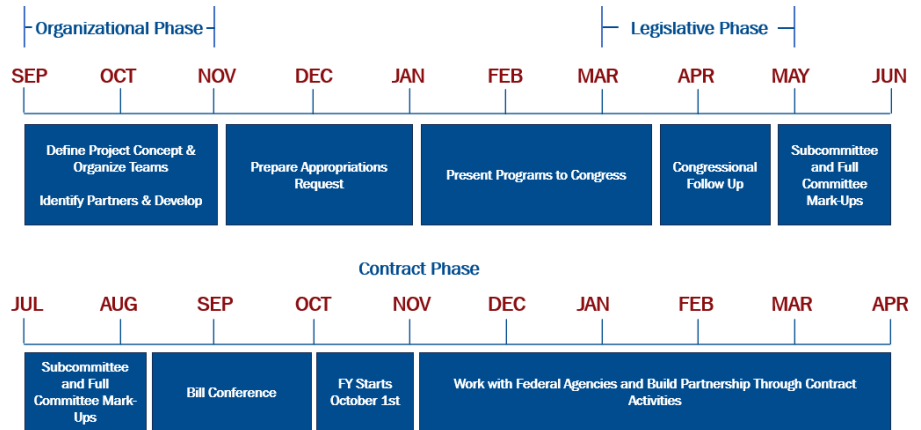


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Organizations should be prepared to brief congressional staff, respond quickly to follow-up questions, adjust the requested amount if necessary, and work with the federal agency after the relevant funding bill is enacted.

When a project is included in the final bill, the recipient generally must work with the relevant federal agency to complete the grant, cooperative agreement, or other award process before funds can be accessed.



Account Selection Matters

One of the most important early questions is whether the project fits within an eligible appropriations account. Earmarks are not available across the entire federal budget. Each year, the House and Senate Appropriations Committees identify specific accounts that may accept requests, and the list can differ by chamber and fiscal year. For universities and nonprofits, often the most relevant non-defense accounts appear in the Labor-HHS-Education, Transportation-HUD, and Commerce-Justice-Science appropriations bills.

Appropriations Bill	Department / Agency / Account / Eligible Chamber	Eligible Activities	Typical Funding Amount
Commerce-Justice-Science	Department of Commerce / National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) / Scientific and Technical Research Services ("NIST-STRS") / House and Senate	External scientific, technological, and standards-related research and technology development projects that advance NIST's mission and research objectives. Construction projects are prohibited.	\$1M-\$2M
	Department of Commerce / National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) / Construction of Research Facilities ("NIST Construction") / Senate	Construction projects involving research facilities, laboratory space, or related scientific and technical infrastructure.	\$20M-\$25M
Labor-HHS-Education	Department of Education / Office of Postsecondary Education / Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education ("Higher Education") / Senate	Postsecondary education projects that improve educational opportunities, including student-support initiatives, institutional capacity, training, equipment, and other higher education priorities.	\$500,000-\$2M
	Department of Education / Office of Elementary and Secondary Education / Fund for the Improvement of Education ("Innovation and Improvement") / Senate	K-12 education projects that improve student learning, expand access to educational services, support school or educator capacity, or advance other related purposes.	\$250,000-\$1M

Transportation- HUD	Department of Housing and Urban Development / Office of Community Planning & Development / Economic Development Initiative ("Community Development Fund") / House and Senate	Property acquisition, affordable housing construction or rehabilitation, public facility construction or improvement, blight removal or remediation.	\$1M-\$1.5M
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This table is illustrative and should be verified against the latest [House](#) and [Senate](#) appropriations guidance for the relevant fiscal year before any request is submitted.

What Makes a Strong Request?

A strong request is usually clear, bounded, and ready for execution. Congressional offices and committee staff need to understand what the project is, who will carry it out, how much it will cost, where it will take place, and what public benefit it will produce.

- **Clear project scope:** The request should describe a discrete project, not an open-ended operating need.
- **Public benefit:** The project should explain how it serves students, patients, workers, local residents, a regional economy, or another identifiable public purpose.
- **Account fit:** The request should match an eligible account and use language consistent with that account's purpose.
- **Credible budget:** The amount requested should be realistic, defensible, and tied to a work plan or cost estimate.
- **Implementation readiness:** The organization should be prepared to accept and manage federal funds, comply with award requirements, and move quickly if funding is enacted.
- **Community support:** Letters of support, local partnerships, and stakeholder alignment can help show that the project is not merely an internal institutional priority.

The Bottom Line

Community Project Funding and Congressionally Directed Spending can be meaningful tools for universities and nonprofits seeking federal support for public-purpose projects. But they require early planning, careful account selection, clear expectations, and disciplined execution.

For organizations that begin early and match the right project to the right account, the earmark process can be a valuable part of a broader federal strategy.



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For over 30 years, we've been helping technology companies navigate the process to secure federal funding.

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