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“Legislators can use the process to make a case for why the projects provide broader benefits.”

Time to make full use of the new earmarks process

It's OK to acknowledge that district grants are local

By James M. Hohman | April 2026

Michigan's budget process has been sharply improved by new statutes that require legislators to file public requests when they seek grants for projects of their choice. It used to be that these grants, sometimes called earmarks or pork projects, popped into the budget at the last minute with no public warning. Now legislators have to describe the projects they want and what the money will be used for. The process gives legislators a chance to show that their requests benefit all Michigan residents, not just the direct beneficiaries.

The state House has held several hearings on legislatively directed spending requests, and it is encouraging to see proponents having to make the case for their requests in a public forum. Now legislators ought to make better use of the process to subject these recommendations to clear, consistent, and objective scrutiny.

State lawmakers are supposed to pass laws that benefit the whole state. It is their job to advance the broader public interest. This is why the state constitution puts higher approval thresholds on appropriations for local and private purposes.

Legislators have broad discretion to determine what benefits the public. It's perfectly fine for elected officials to determine that the state is deficient in its supply of splash parks and set up a grant program to construct more of the facilities across the state.

Of course, lawmakers must figure out which splash park projects get funded and which get don't. They proper way to do this is to establish criteria for what constitutes the best projects and go down the list until they run out of funds.

The state already does this with arts subsidies and the Natural Resources Trust Fund projects. There are

[Continued on back](#)

criteria listed, and administrators score applications to fund the ones that accomplish the state's goals.

The process funds projects in some legislators' districts, and these expenditures are intended to serve local purposes. Yet they must provide some benefit to the state because lawmakers established criteria that applied statewide.

District grants do not have this feature. The money goes to particular fire trucks or sewer projects, not to the best ones. And the particular projects are requested by a legislator.

The new process asks legislators to explain why their requests would benefit the public, to argue that the constitution's two-thirds approval requirement ought not apply. Legislators can use the process to make a case for why the projects provide broader benefits.

For instance, this request for money to replace a water main explains benefits to the community; fewer breaks, greater reliability, better safety. It does not explain why the project benefits people outside of the community.

A possible public rationale might be that the project would reduce wastewater pollution that affects areas beyond the city getting the new water main. The burden of proof is on the proponent to show that the project's benefits extend beyond the users of the system.

For instance, a legislator who wants to improve a state prison in his or her district can argue that it administers justice that benefits all areas of the state, not just the community with the prison.

It's also fine to acknowledge that the spending request is local or private. More legislators should state that their requests provide local or private benefits. It's not outlawed by the state constitution. It is rather subject to the two-thirds approval requirement.

Lawmakers should also take the opportunity to explain why the normal financing mechanisms ought not apply. Water mains tend to be paid by user fees, not by state taxpayers. This ensures that the direct beneficiaries pay the costs. It also encourages governments to build only infrastructure that it can afford. District grant requests give lawmakers a chance to explain why their requests deserve extra consideration.

There is a perennial political desire for elected officials to show that they are doing something for their districts. Yet the state government is created for the benefit of all Michiganders. Lawmakers are given broad discretion to figure out how to advance the public interest. The new district grants process gives legislators a chance to make their case. They ought to use the process to acknowledge that constitutional limits apply to projects that only provide local benefits.

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