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**Challenged pols double up on pork; 54 lawmakers fund pet projects**

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SPRINGFIELD-Illinois lawmakers facing challengers in the fall elections got more than double the pork projects in the state budget that took effect this month than did their colleagues without opponents.

The 54 lawmakers who face contested re-elections this fall took $ 1.84 million, on average, to their districts. By contrast, those without opponents in the November election averaged $ 912,361, a Chicago Sun-Times analysis of the pork list found.

That political reality is seen in a $ 220 million list the Legislature approved to fix potholes, build water towers, erect park district swing sets and enable inmates to skin fish, among other things.

"Basically, that's what this is: ribbon cutters," said Senate President James "Pate" Philip (R-Wood Dale). "If we're lucky, we get the governor to come out, cut the ribbon and have our pictures taken."

Chicago area lawmakers grabbed $ 138.3 million of the overall total of more than 1,100 projects. That will pay for a $ 500,000 rat-control initiative in nearly a dozen city wards, provide $ 4.69 million to stabilize eight miles of eroding Lake Michigan shoreline and pump $ 500,000 into plans to create a cultural center on the South Side bearing Lou Rawls' name.

Each lawmaker got to submit a wish list of projects. But it was the four legislative leaders who decided what got funded -- apparently with an eye on this fall's elections.

"It never ceases to amaze me how philosophy ends when politics and bringing-home-the-bacon begins," said Paul Green, director of Governor State University's Institute for Public Policy and Administration.

Detailed lists of the projects were not available until after lawmakers ended the spring session and left Springfield.

In many cases, lawmakers with the toughest re-election campaigns got more projects than incumbents in districts not expected to change hands this fall.

"That would seem to lend credence to these being pork more than good public policy," said Jim Howard, executive director of Illinois Common Cause. "If they didn't have anything to hide, I think they'd make life easier and make public the necessary information."

Rep. George Scully (D-Flossmoor), a top GOP target whose district got $ 1.07 million in projects, hopes voters in the swing south suburbs recognize a Democratic imprint on all the library computers, firefighting equipment and new pavilions they soon will get.

"It's very beneficial to me to be able to show voters the Democratic Party realizes the importance of the south suburbs and gave our district our fair share," Scully said.

In far southern Illinois, state Rep. Mike Bost (R-Murphysboro), a top Democratic target, got $ 1.25 million for a fish processing center at a prison in his district -- a project Gov. Edgar wryly characterized as one of the "most innovative" of all pork projects this year.

"There never has been a time as a legislator or candidate that I wasn't a target," Bost said. "When you can bring the fire truck here, or a water system there, or a pool there, that does make a difference."

In central Illinois, freshman Sen. Kevin Kehoe (D-Decatur), a top GOP target who replaced the late Sen. Penny Severns (D-Decatur) last March, wound up with $ 4.43 million to spread among his mostly rural district. Among Senate Democrats, only Minority Leader Emil Jones (D-Chicago) and Sen. Debbie Halvorson (D-Crete), herself a target, got more.

"I'm sure that in the big picture, every caucus did look at their targets and it was somewhat of a consideration," Jones spokeswoman Cindy Huebner said. "But again, for the most part, these are needed and worthwhile projects."