

Earmarkist strikes again

St. Pete TIMES EDITORIAL Published June 8, 2007

http://www.sptimes.com/2007/06/08/Opinion/Earmarkist_strikes_ag.shtml

In the world of congressional appropriation, the cross-continental interest of a Fort Yukon, Alaska, representative in a Bonita Springs, Fla., road project is easily explained by three Latin words: quid pro quo. This \$10-million earmark followed this \$40, 000 campaign donation in such a conspicuous display, though, as to demand the attention of the Justice Department.

The source of the \$10-million appropriation to seed a new Interstate 75 interchange in Lee County is a politician, U.S. Rep. Don Young, who was known during his days as Republican chairman of the House Transportation Committee as a serial earmarkist. His greatest claim to fame, previously, was his \$223-million earmark to build a bridge that would connect to an Alaskan island with a population of 80.

In this case, according to the New York Times, Young was apparently repaying a Florida developer and Republican fundraiser, Daniel J. Aronoff, who had raised \$40, 000 in campaign donations for the congressman. Aronoff owns 4, 000 acres along a road called Coconut that would soar in price if ever connected to the interstate. But none of the local transportation and land-use plans calls for that to happen.

The road lies in the congressional district of Connie Mack, who professes ignorance about how the money showed up in the 2006 transportation bill. Maybe he played no part, as he says, but he at least qualifies as an accessory after the fact. Mack joined Young last year in serving the Lee County Metropolitan Planning Organization with threatening letters about its original decision to reject the \$10-million.

"I am concerned," Mack wrote, "that the MPO's vote will make it difficult for Southwest Florida to have future success in securing federal resources for other important projects." In other words, build the road or pay the price.

The Democrats now in charge of Congress claim they want to clean up these kinds of backroom deals, and their commitment is still in question. But they can at least investigate whether ethical rules were violated with this \$10-million gift. And Justice investigators, already busy tracking a web of political favors in Alaska, will want to add Young's Florida spree to the list.