

Keeping One Eye on 2005

By Michael Paddock

Grants Office, LLC.

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As summer begins to set in, those of us who are impacted by the Federal budget - I would venture to say, everyone out there - might be turning our attention to Congress and what is, and is not, happening with the 2005 budget.

A visit to the Thomas Web Site (www.congress.gov) reveals that there hasn't been a great deal of document-able progress toward final passage of the 2005 budget, but that doesn't mean our Representatives have been remiss. The House Appropriations Committee has produced its second report on the 2005 Homeland Security budget bill, an important step for the bill as it moves through Congress.

As a result, we have our first collection of large numbers for next year, including \$4.1 billion for first responders, \$600 million for firefighters, and \$125 million for port security. For more information, check out the House Appropriations Committee's recent chart of homeland security funding at <http://appropriations.house.gov/files/FY05DHSAppropsFullCmteSummary.pdf>).

It's important to keep in mind that we are still early in the budget process. You might remember that in 2004, the Assistance to Firefighters program was cut to \$500 million until it emerged at \$750 million from closed-door conference wrangling at the last step before going to the President for signature. In 2003, Congress cut the President's request for \$3.5 billion for first responders down to \$600 million, only to restore additional funding as part of the same supplemental appropriation that funded the Iraq War. Moreover, this President has never received an on-time budget to sign.

The reason for all this shifting is that, as you might imagine, there are many steps the bill must pass before it is signed into law and becomes part of the official budget.

Step 1 Presidential Referral

Early each year, the President refers a budget to Congress, including all the expenditures he believes are appropriate for the coming year.

Essentially, this is a complete budget that Congress takes as a starting point for negotiation.

Step 2 Sub-Committee Mark-up

With the President's proposed budget in hand, 13 Appropriations sub-committees in both the House and Senate develop the proposal to their liking, for consideration by the full body. It's interesting to note here that there are 13 sub-committees and 13 appropriations bills, conveniently having the same names. This is where a great deal of wrangling takes place and it is also where your advocacy efforts, either for a local earmark for your community or for a national program that benefits everyone, will have the greatest chance of making an impact.

Step 3 Committee Debate and Presentation to the Full Body

The Appropriations Committee must agree to present the sub-committee's recommendations to the full body (House or Senate). The Congressmen talk to each other enough to iron out most potential problems earlier in the process, but there may still be additional debate and modification to the bill at this point by those who weren't involved in the sub-committee.

Step 4 Passage by the Full Body

At this point, the House and Senate each debate their own versions of the bills as they have been presented by their respective Appropriations Committees. There is a good deal of opportunity for talk, and each bill is considered separately. Each bill is also given a title (2004's Defense Appropriation was HR2658 in the House and S1382 in the Senate), and the bills can move at dramatically different speeds through the process. In fact in 2004, the Homeland Security, Legislative Branch, and Defense bills were the only appropriations passed before the start of the fiscal year on October 1, 2003.

If the process begins to run extremely late (into February), each house may lump all the remaining appropriations into an "omnibus" (Latin for "all-in-one") bill, which gets the rest of the budget passed more quickly.

Step 5 Conference Approval

Up to this point, both houses of Congress have been working with their own versions of appropriations bills. In Conference (usually behind closed doors), representatives of both houses come together to work out their differences and create a single unified bill to present to the President for signature into law. While there's not much room here to advocate for your local projects, changes to the appropriations made

for national programs can still happen at this point. Last year's Assistance to Firefighters funds went from \$500 million entering Conference to the current \$750 million that became part of the final Homeland Security budget.

Both houses have to approve the final recommendation of the Conference Committee, which can become a political forum, but generally passes.

Step 6 Signature into Law

Congress is not naïve. They know, through constant communication, what the President will sign and what he will veto. Consequently, they tend to take his interests into account throughout the process, so that the bills they have worked so hard to produce will make it into law. At that point, it becomes a permanent part of that year's budget and is assigned a "Public Law" or "PL" number. The 2004 Homeland Security Appropriation was deemed "PL 108-90," the 90th law created by the 108th Congress.

The numbers we have thus far for 2005 do tell a story of sorts, about the priorities of the Congress, compared with the priorities of the White House, and about the thousands of forces that are manifested in shifts in program funding that take place each year at this level of planning. But don't get too comfortable with the numbers coming out of the Appropriations Committee recently; conversely, don't feel it's too late to advocate to your Representative for the programs and projects you care about. We still have a long way to go.