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'Highway' pork: No rep left behind

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BY **ROBERT NOVAK** SUN-TIMES COLUMNIST

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Rep. Sue Myrick of Charlotte (R-N.C.), a conservative star of the famous Republican congressional class of 1994, has just about had it with the way the world works on Capitol Hill.

"It makes you not want to be here. It just makes you want to leave," she told me Friday morning before the House passed the "highway" bill by a veto-proof 357-65. What infuriates her is the money provided by this bill that does not have a thing to do with highways.

Myrick went before the closed-door House Republican Conference last week to spell out this outrage. The response was icy silence. Even conservatives who have railed at President Bush for moving left on education and Medicare did not want to hear her.

The highway bill marks the absolute termination of the Gingrich Revolution ushered in by the 1994 sweep. In the face of Bush's repeated veto threats, Republicans are determined to pass a bill filled with earmarked spending for individual members of Congress. The 1982 highway bill contained only 10 earmarks. The 1991 bill, the last highway bill passed under Democratic leadership, contained 538 such projects. But the addiction for pork has grown so large that the current bill contains at least 3,193 earmarks.

The addiction is bipartisan, thanks to the policy of the House's reigning king of pork. While House Transportation Committee Chairman Don Young has packed the bill with money for his state of Alaska, he makes sure Democrats are

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allocated their share of money for roads and other goodies in order to build a bipartisan majority on the floor.

Young is careful to fund the pet project of Rep. James Oberstar of Minnesota, the Transportation Committee's senior Democrat. The bill establishes Oberstar's proposed Safe Routes to School Program, earmarking \$1 billion to enable and encourage children to walk and bicycle to school.

Here are a few of the earmarked non-highway projects (along with their congressional beneficiaries):

*Construction of "Renaissance Square" in Rochester, N.Y., including a performing arts center. \$7 million, Rep. Louise Slaughter, a highly partisan liberal Democrat.

*Renovation of a historic depot and bus station in Jessup, Ga., \$1 million, Rep. Jack Kingston, a leading Republican conservative.

*Improvement of the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Mich. \$1.5 million, Rep. John Dingell, the senior member of the House and a fierce Democratic battler.

*A new parking building in Oak Lawn, \$4 million. Rep. William Lipinski, an 11-term Democrat.

*A series of improvements for the Blue Ridge Music Center in Galax, Va., \$2.5 million, Rep. Rick Boucher, an 11-term Democrat.

Despite repeated threats of a presidential veto, the House Republican leadership actually added a billion dollars to the bill last week. It was not necessary to gain additional votes on the floor, but odds and ends had to be fixed.

For example, Young had punished freshman Republican Rep. Marilyn Musgrave for opposing his proposed gas tax increase by eliminating all money for her Colorado district. Because a rising conservative could not be treated that way, money for her roads was restored. The final version made sure that no congressman was left behind.

Only 58 Republicans (and six Democrats) joined Myrick in voting no Friday. She is not opposed to spending money for roads, within reason. It's the non-highway money that bothers her. "Why are we paying for all of this stuff?" Myrick asked me (using a more vivid word than "stuff"). "It's just the way you get along here."

That so serious a conservative as Myrick feels she would like to quit shows how much the climate has changed on Capitol Hill since she and other bright-eyed new Republican House members were sent there by the 1994 election.

I wrote 10 years ago that Republicans, taking control for the first time in 40 years, faced a test. Metaphorically, would they close the executive washroom or just change the locks? It was almost immediately evident that they would take the latter course. Now, it's becoming clear the erstwhile Republican reformers also are super-sizing what they once condemned.

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