

Brookfield Zoo dolphins among beneficiaries of state government capital bill

First of 2 parts

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When Gov. Pat Quinn signed a \$31 billion capital spending measure this month, he and lawmakers who approved the bill said the plan is a good deal for the state.

It will put thousands of people to work, they said. Crumbling roads and bridges no longer will pose a threat to motorists. Substandard water and sewer systems will get fixed. Fire stations and other government buildings will get roofs and other needed improvements.

No one mentioned dolphins. But dolphins at the Brookfield Zoo in Chicago will benefit from \$100,000 in taxpayer money that will go toward fixing up their tank, which needs a new liner. The Chicago Zoological Society that runs the zoo is hardly destitute. According to its most recent tax return, the society had more than \$135 million in the bank at the end of 2007.

Dolphins aren't alone in receiving hundreds of thousands of dollars from taxpayers who might question whether a state that's furloughing workers and threatening layoffs should be spending \$100,000 to build a pavilion at the Anderson Japanese Gardens in Rockford. Or giving \$100,000 to the Irish American Heritage Center in Chicago. Or \$2 million to the Old Town School of Folk Music in Chicago. Or \$1 million to Beat Creators, which plans to help kids make music. Or \$450,000 to the Muntu Dance Theater, where First Lady Michelle Obama once sat on the board of directors.

"This is getting beyond absurd," said Greg Blankenship, chairman of the Illinois Alliance For Growth. "How is this going to affect our roads and bridges? What is the Irish American Heritage Center going to do to improve my ability to get around the state of Illinois?"

Dolphins and Japanese gardens and music programs all are fine things, said John Tillman, CEO of the Illinois Policy Institute, But state government shouldn't be paying for them, he said.

"Everybody says we're in a financial crisis," Tillman said, "yet it's business as usual."

Both the Alliance for Growth and the Policy Institute are advocates generally for lower taxes and smaller government. But Tillman and Blankenship aren't alone in criticizing a system in which party caucuses divvy up millions of dollars for private entities such as theaters, veterans groups, museums and zoos. And it can be difficult to tell which legislator pushed which projects because no names are attached to line items in the spending bills.

"It's a lousy way to make public policy," says Kent Redfield, a professor emeritus of political science at the University of Illinois at Springfield. "It gets you away from allocating money on the basis of need."

Steve Brown, spokesman for House Speaker Michael Madigan, D-Chicago, wasn't impressed with Redfield's analysis.

"What does Mr. Redfield, who has this nice position — a government-funded position — what expertise does Mr. Redfield have in terms of capital funding programs?" Brown said. "I'm not aware of anything wasteful being done."

At the Old Town School of Folk Music, which is slated to receive \$2 million for an expansion project, callers listen to a rendition of "It Takes A Worried Man" when placed on hold. But Eric Delli Bovi, director of external affairs for the school, doesn't sound worried when he picks up the phone.

"I had a feeling these sorts of calls would be coming," Delli Bovi says.

With a \$5.3 million payroll and 300 employees, the nonprofit school is an economic engine in the Lincoln Square area of Chicago, Delli Bovi says.

"We're putting something like \$11 million back into the economy every year," Delli Bovi said. "We believe this is an investment. It's not a gift."

Sylvester E. Powell, executive director of Beat Creators, says his 5-year-old nonprofit organization will spend its \$1 million in state money to buy a building on the West Side of Chicago so kids can make music after school and learn about the entertainment industry. Beat Creators doesn't currently have a program, but has completed a pilot program at a church that taught kids about music, Powell said.

Taxpayers will benefit because it's cheaper to give kids alternatives to crime than pay to put them in prison, he said.

Some beneficiaries of state money say the state has more important things to do.

"I think it was unconscionable to pass taxes for a capital budget before they passed taxes for services," said Polly Poskin, vice president of Harvard Park Home Ownership, Inc., which is getting \$25,000. "If the state of Illinois said, 'Oops, we made a mistake,' I would be the first one in line to say, 'Take the money back. Shift it to services.'"

Poskin said her group hasn't decided how it will spend its allotment, but sidewalk improvements are high on the wish list.

The Harvard Park group is one of at least eight neighborhood groups in Springfield receiving grants as high as \$50,000.

The grants came as news to Bill Castor, president of the Vinegar Hill Neighborhood Association, who didn't know until a reporter called that his group is getting \$25,000 to improve sidewalks and street lighting.

"I'm not aware that we as an association submitted a grant proposal," Castor said. "It's certainly gratifying to hear this was done on our behalf."

Victoria Clemons, executive director of Downtown Springfield, Inc., also didn't know her organization is getting \$75,000 until a reporter called. After checking with state Rep. Raymond Poe, R-Springfield, she said the money would be spent on kiosks that tourists can use to locate restaurants and other downtown attractions.

Poe said the money for neighborhood associations will help areas that have lost residents in the past.

"All these small neighborhoods," Poe said, "there's so much deterioration of infrastructure."

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Bomke: There should be a better way

State Sen. Larry Bomke, R-Springfield, doesn't necessarily like the way lawmakers divide capital money between political caucuses and members who essentially are free to choose how it will be spent. But he's learned to live with it.

"I would much rather that all the money not go to any members but go to specific road projects, bridges and things like that," Bomke said. "I think it would be much better if it were done the way school construction grants are done."

Bomke said he believes tax money should go to taxing bodies, not private entities. And so, when he got a chance, he steered money to such things as a water system upgrade in Elkhart, a sewer system in Curran and repairs to firehouses.

Legislators receive as much as \$4 million each to divvy up, Bomke said. Senate Republicans spread the money out equally between members, he said.

"I don't think there's a limit," Bomke said. "The leader has the most to do with it."

While outsiders might think giving tax money to nonprofit groups or local governments wins votes, it's not that simple, Bomke said.

"People get angry," Bomke said. "A community gets something as a grant and everybody knows it. To the community that doesn't get it, it's pork, and they're not happy about it."

Like other local legislators, Bomke refused to second-guess how other legislative colleagues divided their shares.

State Rep. Rich Brauer, R-Petersburg, thinks the system works.

"No one knows the district better than the representative or senator," Brauer said. "Quite frankly, there's no way you can get 118 representatives in a room and that many senators and say, 'This is what we want in the budget.'"

Brauer said he secured funding for Lincoln's New Salem State Historic Site, the Hope School and a children's museum planned for Southwind Park.

State Rep. Raymond Poe, R-Springfield, said he had money set aside for the Boys and Girls Clubs of Springfield, United Cerebral Palsy Land of Lincoln and about a half-dozen neighborhood associations.

"That's the kinds of things we try to do," Poe said. "I'm not different than anyone else."

Still a need

The state's \$31 billion capital budget probably won't be enough to fix all the state's roads, bridges, sewers and water systems.

Four years ago, the American Society of Civil Engineers reported that car repairs caused by bad roads cost Illinois motorists \$2.2 billion a year, an average of \$271 per driver. This year, the society this year reported that the state needs \$13.4 billion in repairs to wastewater systems and, over the next two decades, \$13.5 billion in repairs to drinking water infrastructure.

The society didn't put a price tag on road or bridge repairs, but reported that 18 percent of the state's bridges are structurally deficient or obsolete and that 34 percent of the state's major roads are in poor or mediocre condition.

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