

With Paterson's vetoes, pork-barrel spending to end Wednesday

BY JOSEPH SPECTOR • ALBANY BUREAU • SEPTEMBER 13, 2010, 6:10 PM

ALBANY -- Gov. David Paterson's vetoes in July of about \$190 million in legislative earmarks goes into effect Wednesday, but not before about \$35.6 million of it was approved, state records show.

Since Paterson's vetoes in early July, the state has signed off on **funding** for nearly 1,400 so-called member items, which are pet projects funded at the discretion of lawmakers for non-profits and local governments.

During a bitter budget fight with the Legislature, Paterson vetoed last year's member-item allotment of about \$190 million as a way to save money and put pressure on lawmakers to get a budget deal. A budget for the 2010-11 fiscal year was approved in early August.

But while Paterson sought to eliminate member-item spending, an obscure state law allowed the money from the 2009-10 budget to flow until Sept. 15. That meant non-profit groups were scrambling to get their paperwork in to the state before the spending was shut off.

A memo to state agencies from the state Comptroller's Office last month said that any member-item appropriations from the 2009-10 that hasn't been approved will lapse Wednesday.

Gannett's Albany Bureau first reported in early August how the member-item money was still flowing despite the vetoes. But the governor's office has defended the move, saying most of the **savings** will be realized.

Groups, meanwhile, said the money is often criticized for being pork-barrel spending, but they rely on it to provide programs and services in their communities.

"Many people consider them pork, but for many not-for-profits, including our agencies that serve low-income families, those are tangible resources that provide case management, **transportation** and purchase of various goods and services," said Denise Harlow, CEO of the state Community Action Association.

In July, \$12.5 million for member items was approved by the Comptroller's Office for about 600 projects. In August, \$16.7 million was approved for another 600 projects, while so far this month another \$6.4 million was signed off on for about 180 projects.

Taxpayers' money has been approved for a whole slew of organizations, such as American Red Cross and Alzheimer's Association chapters across New York.

For example, the Lourdes Hospital Foundation in Binghamton was awarded \$40,000 for a community health center in early August. The Westchester Arts Council was awarded \$62,500 in August for a summer concert series, while the Steuben County Soil and Water Conservative District was awarded \$23,000 for a new pickup truck, records show. Rochester Area Crime Stoppers received \$7,500, while the Village At Ithaca school program was awarded \$20,000. The Kerhonkson Fire Department in Ulster County was awarded \$3,500.

Paterson spokesman Morgan Hook said the Democratic governor's rejection of more than 6,600 member item re-appropriations "has forever changed the spendthrift culture of Albany."

There is no new member-item money in this year's budget, which started April 1.

"Due to Governor Paterson's actions, the 2010-11 fiscal year will go down in history as the year taxpayers were not left holding the bill for the Legislature's reluctance to face a difficult fiscal reality," Hook said.

Paterson's term expires this year, and he is not seeking election this fall.

"With the state facing more than \$37 billion in deficit over the next three years, future governors would be well advised to use the veto pen to protect the state's fiscal health," Hook said. "Future Legislatures should take note."

Gannett reported in May that despite delaying aid to schools, briefly closing parks and temporarily withholding money for road projects, the state authorized \$1.4 billion for 2,320 contracts since the fiscal year started April 1. That included \$9.3 million for member items.

Soon after, Paterson announced he would veto the member items that would need to be re-appropriated to stay valid. He held marathon sessions in July to personally sign 6,709 vetoes.

Some nonprofit groups said the member-item money is important, but shouldn't be relied on to keep the agencies afloat.

"A member item is not intended, I don't believe, to be an ongoing funding source," said Doug Sauer, CEO of the New York Council of Non Profits.
