

Pork's Oink or Can-Do Results? Question at Center of Controversy

Columbus' "can-do" reputation may end up canned if local Republicans, anxious to cut what they deem frivolous state government spending, have their way.

Over the past 30-plus years, the Columbus legislative delegation has marched on Atlanta in seeming lockstep to bring home state funding. The unity has netted big bucks for the city. In the last seven years alone, according to Democratic state Rep. Calvin Smyre, \$50 million in state money has been landed to go with \$450 million in local funds, paying for \$500 million worth of major projects.

"It's a nine-to-one ratio. For every \$1 million the state invests, the citizens of Columbus put up \$9 million," says Smyre, who also is executive vice president of corporate affairs for the \$14.9 billion Synovus

Financial Corp., based in Columbus, and the chairman and CEO of Synovus Foundation Inc.

But Republican Reps. Danae Roberts and Vance Smith, and GOP state Sen. Seth Harp argue that the sweet taste of success is actually the bitter bite of political pork. Their maverick voting records, by Columbus standards, and open disdain for the city's collaborative successes have raised disapproving eyebrows in Columbus, but also applause from their political supporters.

Republican votes didn't defeat next year's \$15.4 billion state budget — \$1.3 million of which is earmarked for Columbus projects — nor did they torpedo the supplemental budget containing \$17.2 million for a myriad of Columbus projects, ranging from \$11 million for an expansion of the Columbus Convention and Trade Center to \$1 million for a new juvenile court.

But feathers have been ruffled, and area business and civic leaders are grumbling publicly about local GOP efforts to block state funds for Columbus. Such grumbling is unprecedented. Synovus Financial Corp. Chairman and CEO Jim Blanchard, for instance, this spring said that "partisanship is becoming a threat to our unity in the General Assembly."

Blanchard, one of the most influential business leaders in Georgia, made the remark at a meeting sponsored by the Columbus Consolidated Government. Attending was a cross-section of citizens bent on formulating an action plan to steer future growth. Public-private partnerships, business leaders note, have undergirded much of Columbus' recent growth.

"The energy here is fragile," said Blanchard. "It can change quickly. But no matter how fleeting, it's worth it."

The meeting he addressed was similar to several held by Columbus City Manager Carmen Cavezza and to those the legislative delegation itself routinely holds before going to the Gold Dome each January. In the past, the outcome of such meetings determined which projects the city would undertake and how the delegation would

vote. Not this time, with the eight-member delegation consisting of five Democrats and three Republicans. The legislative session instead saw Republicans cast votes along party lines and in furtherance of campaign promises, rather than towing the line in the decades-old Columbus tradition of voting on budget matters as "one voice."

GOP legislators say they want to lower state spending and cut state taxes, a philosophy they

Point/counterpoint: GOP state Sen. Seth Harp (L) and Democratic Rep. Calvin Smyre



believe doesn't hold much sway in a legislature controlled by Democrats.

"I campaigned on the issue that the state budgeting process was really out of control, and serving in the General Assembly has only confirmed that," says freshman Sen. Harp, a Columbus attorney. About \$500 million in the supplemental budget, and another \$60 million in the general budget, he says, were allocated to various pork projects throughout Georgia.

"For instance, there was \$2.5 million in the state budget for golf courses," says Harp. "I think golf courses are a wonderful idea. But I think communities need to tax their people and build the courses themselves. This was state money squandered."

In Columbus, local taxes have not increased in seven years, although residents have approved two sales tax referendums in the last decade. Democrats, city leaders and Greater Columbus Chamber of Commerce officials say that the referendums are good indicators of public approval and trust in using tax money to spur growth.

Projects funded by sales tax monies, coupled with state grants, have included the Columbus Civic Center, Riverwalk, the RiverCenter for the Performing Arts and the Columbus State University expansion.

Harp says he objects to state funding for such projects because there is no accountability for state dollars spent — in Columbus and across Georgia.

"There's really no justification for how the state spends the money — what type of things the money buys," says Harp. "It's just kind of a 'good ole boys' network regarding where money goes."

Harp's comments, which resonate strongly with the GOP base, irk those who tout

Columbus as a can-do city. They point to completed projects to support that claim. The "can-do" sales pitch, in fact, has become the city's trump card in attracting new industry, jobs and talent to the area.

"Attitudes are contagious. Whether good or bad, they're caught," says Michael Gaymon, president of the Greater Columbus Chamber. "We believe Columbus' can-do attitude has a major impact on the region."

Moreover, Harp this spring referred to community affairs funds in the state supplemental budget as going for "frivolous junk." The funds are used largely to promote economic development. Although he denies that he was referring to Columbus projects, he continues to question what he calls pork in his own hometown.

"I must say I'm troubled by the amount and number of projects that are in Columbus that fall in that category," he says. "Look at state funds that came to Columbus to take care of the homeless. I don't know who got the money."

Harp says he is deeply concerned over several items in the state budget earmarked for Columbus. Funds for the arts is one.

"I support the Springer Theater and the Liberty Theater," he says. "But why are state funds being used? They ought to be Columbus, Ga., projects. The thing of it is, if you give people back their money, instead of the state squandering it, then I suspect local government could raise the funds to support these types of projects."

Defenders of the funding, however, note that the Springer is the Official State Theater of Georgia, and while heavily supported by Columbus patrons, it's been the state's responsibility for years.

Few doubt other county delegations to the Legislature would welcome the prospect of getting funds Columbus may lose due to partisan disagreement, a distinct possibility if the Republicans continue to break rank. The city also may lose further influence in the upcoming reapportionment battles, in which it is likely to lose a seat in the state House.

Still, the delegation retains hefty clout. Rep. Tom Buck, a veteran of 35 years, is chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee and a budget conferee when bills must be reconciled between the House and Senate.

A 28-year political veteran, Smyre chairs the House Rules Committee, the gateway to the House floor. Buck also serves on that panel. For a bill to reach the floor, it must first pass Rules Committee muster. Most don't.

"The Rules Committee can be a burial ground and sometimes is," says Smyre. "But it should be. I say we have too much government already."

At least that's one point both sides can agree upon. Sort of.

"The people in my district think the government is too big and too invasive, but the only way you get less

government is to take money away from it," says Harp.

Smyre also chairs the House Democratic Caucus, the chief determinant of party positions on legislation. Plus, he's a member of the so-called Green Door Committee, the legislative powerhouse on the state budget.

"Calvin Smyre is one of those unique individuals who's both politically savvy and streetwise," says Gov. Roy Barnes.

He's also a political operative with clout on both the national as well as state scene. Smyre serves on the Democratic National Committee and the Democratic Leadership Council, plus he chaired a statewide gubernatorial campaign for Zell Miller and was deputy chairman in Barnes' 1998 race for governor.

"Power is to be used, not abused," says Smyre. "I fight for Columbus, that's why I'm in Atlanta. It's not about me, it's about what Columbus wants."

Judging by the clamor over GOP legislators, the Columbus power structure may want more — not less — state support to fuel growth. And many movers and shakers in the city are banking on Smyre and Buck to keep the state spigot open.

Even Harp agrees the two are not likely to allow Columbus to suffer a loss of state funds.

"It's probably not going to happen because Mr. Buck and Mr. Smyre are two of the most powerful members of the House, and they're not going to let Columbus falter," he says.

As for the 23-year-old Roberts, believed to be the youngest legislator in state history, she's sticking to her guns. "Realistically, the state budget can't be cut. Our amendments don't get passed," she says. "I honestly can't tell you if Columbus will lose state money in the process of our trying to cut the budget. But there seems to be no balance in the sums given to each city. It seems to be just a reward system for Democrats."

Roberts says she votes for the benefit of the state overall, not against Columbus in particular. "Honestly, I do not think Columbus projects are what we consider to be pork. When looking at the budget, I wasn't looking just at Columbus, but at how the whole budget was allocated."

It's other places in the state, she says, that disperse the pork. "The city of Augusta, for instance, received money for flowers," she says.

Harp believes Columbus would not suffer disproportionately should Republicans ever gain the majority in the House and Senate and enact spending cuts.

"Columbus will not lose any more than other cities because the cuts would be across the board and the money either returned to taxpayers or paid toward the state's nearly \$7 billion debt," he says.

The debate promises to continue. Another session, after all, is only six months off. — Pam Baker

*Learn How Far Your
Mind Can Take You*



Troy State University

Southeast Region

TSU specializes in the adult learner with business and other degrees at undergraduate and graduate levels. Classes meet in the evenings, on weekends and through distance learning.

Complete degrees offered online.

Columbus/Ft. Benning
1-866-557-8608

Albany
1-866-288-2097

Atlanta
1-866-426-1068

Brunswick
1-866-304-9130

Augusta
1-866-557-8617

www.tsufb.edu