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Senate Approves \$350 Million in Projects Intended for Economic Development

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ALBANY — While state analysts are forecasting lean times, lawmakers are bankrolling what some see as a bumper crop of pork.

Late Tuesday, the Senate approved \$350 million worth of capital projects. At the direction of Senate Republicans, the state will be spending \$5 million to pay for buses at private or parochial schools, \$1 million to finance an archival depository at the Center for Jewish History in Manhattan and \$500,000 for the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown.

“These economic development projects will continue our successful partnership among the private sector, higher education and state government to help create new jobs and retain the highly skilled work force necessary to sustain future economic growth,” the Senate majority leader, [Joseph L. Bruno](#), said in a statement.

The projects are part of \$1.2 billion set aside in the budget to be spread around by legislative leaders and Gov. [David A. Paterson](#), a Democrat, in the name of economic development. But the secretive process of how Albany lawmakers in the majority parties pick and choose projects in their districts has long been criticized, particularly when it involves large amounts of borrowed money in a state already awash in debt.

“The problem with these types of allocations is it’s hard to know if they have any benefit,” said Elizabeth Lynam, deputy research director for the [Citizens Budget Commission](#). “How does anyone know whether these organizations have merit? Some may, some may not. There just isn’t a lot of scrutiny of this part of the budget.”

“The budget is already in need of cutting, and they continue to spend on the capital side without much restraint,” she added. “They get the benefit of cutting ribbons now and paying for it later.”

Edmund J. McMahon, director of the Manhattan Institute’s Empire Center for [New York State](#) Policy, which advocates lower spending, said, “They’re spending scarce capital funding on political wants when there are billions of real infrastructure needs and commitments that won’t be covered by the current highway, bridge and mass transit plans.”

The budget also sets aside \$350 million for capital grants allocated by the State Assembly, which is controlled by Democrats. Most of those projects were selected and disclosed at the time the budget passed in April, however. The projects are intended “to help develop a strong, job-creating climate,” according to an Assembly news release at the time.

Private corporations, including many based upstate, accounted for tens of millions of dollars in capital grants from the Assembly. Magna Powertrain, an auto parts manufacturer, received a \$13 million grant for its Syracuse-area plant. Both chambers are directing millions of dollars to renovate a Hyatt hotel in Buffalo and a historic hotel in Syracuse.

Five state university campuses received grants totaling \$38 million from the Assembly, including money for the high-tech “incubator programs” and \$7 million to build an “Equine Physiology and Rehabilitation Center” at the State University at Morrisville. The Assembly’s largest grant so far this year, \$25 million, went to the [University of Rochester](#) to build a new center for clinical and translational sciences.

Tens of millions of dollars went to museums, libraries and civic institutions in New York City, including \$2 million for the [Brooklyn Academy of Music](#); \$5 million for El Museo del Barrio, a museum in East Harlem dedicated to Latino culture; and \$15 million for the [Queens Museum of Art](#).

In the Senate, millions of dollars were directed to private businesses like Akrimax Pharmaceuticals and Empire AgriFuel LLC in the hopes of preserving jobs upstate. Companies often reciprocate the largess by making political contributions to the sponsoring lawmakers.

Regarding museums that received grants, John McArdle, a spokesman for Mr. Bruno, said, “They are a tourist attraction and a destination for people.”

“In many of these communities, particularly upstate, these museums are a big draw,” he added.

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