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Federal Earmarks in the State of Georgia

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Earmarks have been controversial ever since becoming a prominent part of the congressional spending process. Critics charge that earmarks fund projects with little or no economic value (for instance Ted Stevens' "Bridge to Nowhere,") but instead allow Congress members to direct government spending to campaign contributors (the charge leading to a federal investigation of the now-defunct lobbying firm PMA Group). On the other side of the controversy, congressional earmarks do fund a number of community improvements which are very valuable, at least locally. In Georgia, the fiscal 2010 appropriations bills included earmarks which allocated \$450,000 to update College Park's emergency response technology, \$2 million for needed repairs at Fort Pulaski outside of Savannah, \$1.5 million for a mass transit center in Albany, and over \$22 million for a new health and dental clinic at Fort Benning.

In sum, over 200 earmarks directed \$786 billion to the state of Georgia in 2010. Thus, the controversy over earmarks centers on the question of whether the economic and social value of these types of projects outweighs the damage, real or perceived, that earmarks do to the legitimacy of our electoral and spending processes.

Throughout the debate, there has been some confusion over what exactly earmarks are and how they receive funding. An earmark is a government grant to a specific recipient which is written directly into a congressional spending bill. The primary difference between earmarks and other forms of government spending is that members of Congress decide, at the program level, where and to whom to direct funding, and the amount. This sets earmarks apart from most other funding mechanisms, in which final spending decisions are approved indirectly, such as by a bureaucratic agency or by a pre-determined formula.

Many earmarks originate when someone contacts a member of Congress with a funding request. This person often represents an organization in the Congress member's district, such as a nonprofit organization or a local governmental unit, and usually hires a professional lobbyist to contact the member of Congress. The members or their staffs review the requests received, and forward the approved requests to the chairs of the House and Senate Appropriations subcommittees. The chairs receive earmark requests from the U.S. President as well, and have sole discretion to decide which earmarks get funded. The subcommittee chairs place the requests *they* approve of in the subcommittees' annual appropriations bill, typically after the subcommittee votes on it. From there, the earmarks travel through the legislative process as part of the larger spending bill. Later in the budgeting process, most individual earmarks are overshadowed by larger and more visible spending priorities. As a result, the vast majority of earmarks never receive a vote or a public vetting at any stage of the legislative process.¹

¹ For richer descriptions of the earmarking process, see Savage 1991 and Evans 1995.

One result of this process is that political factors play an important role in determining where earmarked money goes. Since the vast majority of each member's earmark requests direct spending to his or her own district, the constituents of party leaders, Appropriations committee members, majority party members, and electorally vulnerable members (particularly those within the majority party) get more government spending directed to them than other citizens. Political ideology also plays a significant role: liberal members, all else equal, tend to procure more spending via earmarks than conservative members. On the other hand, the constituency itself also influences how earmark money gets distributed. Because so many earmark requests originate in the constituency, and because members of Congress want to be re-elected, earmarks typically reflect a local population's economic, demographic or social concerns. For instance, congressional districts with a heavily agricultural economy tend to receive agriculturally-oriented earmarks; districts with a heavy military presence tend to receive defense-related earmarks, and so forth. Thus, the distribution of earmark money across districts and states is determined by a mix of political and constituency-based factors.²

Georgia Earmarks in National Perspective³

The 2010 federal appropriations bills contained over 11,000 earmarks, which collectively allocated \$37 billion of spending. Of those earmarks, 226 were directed to Georgia, bringing \$787 million to the state. At \$83 per capita, Georgia ranked 32nd in per capita spending. Figure 1 displays per capita spending throughout the 50 states. The range is wide, from Alaska at the high end (\$744 per capita), to Michigan at the low (\$29 per capita). Several factors are related to variation in per capita spending among the states. The most important among these is state size: less populous states tend to get an outsize share of government spending generally, and earmarked dollars are no exception.⁴ Thus, none of the top seven states in Figure 1 rank higher than 34th in population. Other factors associated with high earmark spending at the state level are representation on the Senate Appropriations committee; senior Democratic representation on the House Appropriations committee, having two majority party Senators, and having a heavy military presence in the state. (I will discuss this last trend in more depth below.)

Table 1 lists the sources of Georgia's earmarks. For the purposes of Table 1, I counted each earmark and the dollar value fully for each requestor, even though many earmarks were jointly requested by more than one member. As a result, both the total number of earmarks and dollars listed in the bottom row are less than the sums would be if we just added the figures listed in the table. With that in mind, note that the two biggest earmark sources for Georgia are Sen. Saxby Chambliss and President Barack Obama. Nationally, the president placed 1,509 earmarks (worth \$9.1 billion) into spending bills on his own, and an additional 838 (worth \$12.7 billion) jointly

² For more on the distribution of earmarks among members of Congress, see Lazarus 2009, 2010b, Lazarus and Steigerwalt 2009, Lee 2003, Balla et al 2002, Frisch 1998.

³ All data used in this section and the next come from Taxpayers for Common Sense, and is available at www.taxpayer.net.

⁴ This is largely if not entirely due to malapportionment in the Senate. For more on this trend, see, e.g., Lee and Oppenheimer (1999).

with one or more members of Congress. Moreover, presidential earmarks were worth considerably more money than those requested by members of Congress on their own. Presidential earmarks were worth \$6 million on average; those requested by the president jointly with a member of Congress averaged \$15 million; and those requested by members of Congress without presidential input averaged about \$1 million. Thus, it is no surprise the president plays a strong role in the earmarking process locally: his 55 Georgia earmarks were collectively worth \$638 million, or 81% of the state's total.

Individually, House members are responsible for many fewer earmarks than Senators. While the average U.S. Senator placed 88 earmarks worth \$232 million into the 2010 spending bills, the average House member placed only 21 earmarks worth \$48 million. It's not surprising that the values shown on Table 1 for Georgia's Representatives are significantly smaller than the values for Georgia's Senators. Nonetheless, two House members come close: Republican Jack Kingston and Democrat Sanford Bishop are the two most active earmarkers in the Georgia House delegation. This can be credited to the fact that both are on the House Appropriations committee, whose members (both majority and minority) annually procure many millions of dollars more in earmarks than non-members.⁵ On the other end of the spectrum, five members of Georgia's delegation placed few, if any, earmarks into the spending bills. John Linder and Nathan Deal⁶ (now the Georgia Governor) placed only two and four earmarks into the bills respectively, while Lynn Westmoreland, Tom Price, and Paul Broun eschewed earmarks altogether. Notably, all five members are Republicans and all are extremely conservative. Illustrating this is the final column of Table 1, which assigns each Georgia House member an ideological rank within the House of Representatives. Low numbers mean a member is among the most liberal in the House and high numbers mean a member is among the most conservative.⁷ Each member who procured few or no earmarks has a score above 400, placing them among the most conservative 10% of all House members.

This bears out a larger national trend whereby conservative members are increasingly boycotting, partially or in total, the earmarking process. They are following a perception among voters—especially conservative voters—that the earmarking process itself is irretrievably corrupt. This broader trend is illustrated in Figure 2, which divides all House members into deciles according to their ideology, and displays each group's average number of earmarks and average aggregate dollar value, as well as the percent of each group placing zero earmarks into the spending bills. As Figure 2 illustrates, none of the three trend lines moves very consistently over the liberal or even moderate areas of the graph. However, the two most conservative groups place fewer earmarks, procure less money, and are more likely to forgo earmarks altogether than their colleagues. Thus Georgia's five very conservative members are in line with their ideologically like-minded colleagues in being hesitant to use earmarks as a spending vehicle.

⁵ Indeed, Kingston is the senior Republican member of the committee's Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies, giving him additional clout in the earmarking process.

⁶ Nathan Deal retired from the House of Representatives, and is now the Governor of Georgia. He was replaced by Tom Graves, who did not join the House in time to place any earmarks into the 2010 spending bills.

⁷ Scores are derived from Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal's DW-NOMINATE scores, available at www.voteview.com. For more information on how these scores are constructed, see Poole and Rosenthal (1995).

Georgia's Earmarks

What was the \$786 million earmarked for Georgia spent on? Table 2 provides a broad answer to the question by displaying, in somewhat subjective categories, the type of spending each earmark is devoted to. More than anything else, Table 2 indicates that the overwhelming majority of earmarked money coming to Georgia was spent on the military. Military earmarks – i.e., those included in the Defense or Military Construction appropriations bills – accounted for slightly less than 30% of all earmarks, but 86% of all earmarked dollars. Moreover, at an average of \$10 million each military earmarks were easily the most lucrative.⁸

Georgia's military earmarks were designated to fund a wide range of activities. Several were allocated to develop new weapons systems for use on the battlefield, such as \$2 million allocated to Daniel Defense, Inc., to develop a special operations modification for the M4 Carbine firearm. Others were allocated for training purposes, such as the \$4 million allocated to the Georgia Air National Guard to acquire Joint Threat Emitters. However, a significant fraction of earmarked defense dollars are designated to improve quality of life for soldiers and their families, such as \$4.9 million allocated for a new dental clinic at Fort Benning, \$22 million for a new elementary school at Fort Stewart and \$80 million for a new barracks and dining center, also at Fort Stewart. (This last was Georgia's largest single earmark.)

Other spending categories of note include those which allow members of Congress to claim credit for having measurably improved some aspect of life for a large number of residents in the district – all the better if it can be done at a relatively low cost. Many of these were intended to update a police department's technology, but the uses of earmarks vary widely. Examples include:

- \$55,000 for in-car video systems for the Ben Hill County Sheriff's Department
 - \$500,000 for a crime lab in Valdosta
 - \$250,000 for a Gang Intervention Project for the Rockdale County Sheriff's Department
 - \$140,000 for a Methamphetamine Task Force for the Twiggs County Sheriff's Office
- Examples of earmarks in other categories include:
- In the "Agriculture" category, \$346,000 was allocated to the University of Georgia to facilitate the study of insects afflicting the cotton plant
 - Using two separate earmarks in the "Economic Development" category, \$14.9 million was allocated to expand and improve Savannah Harbor
 - In the "Education" category, \$400,000 was allocated to the Rockdale County Public School System to implement year-round pre-K classes, and \$200,000 was allocated to Morehouse College to assist in managing the Morehouse King Collection
 - In the "Environment" category, \$1.2 million was allocated to expand the Bond Swamp National Wildlife Refuge in Bibb and Twiggs counties, and \$1 million dollars was awarded to the Consortium for Plant Biotechnology Research on St. Simon's Island

⁸ Once again, this pattern followed national trends. Nationally, the military accounted for 64% of all earmarked spending, and defense earmarks were the most lucrative. Earmarks in the Military Construction appropriations bill averaged over \$16 million each, and those included in the Defense appropriations bill averaged \$5.4 million. This second figure was more than twice as high as the highest value in any non-military appropriations bill.

- In the “Family Services” category, \$75,000 was awarded to the Southwest Georgia Humanitarian Rural Outreach Program in Decatur County, and \$300,000 was allocated to assist in the construction of the Ellenwood Community Center in DeKalb County
- In the “Mass Transit” category, \$4 million was allocated to the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority to acquire clean fuel buses
- In the “Transportation” category, most earmarks were for surface road improvements, such as \$500,000 for “Anvil Block Road Widening” in Ellenwood
- The “Urban Water/Sewer” category allocated earmarks between \$250,000 and \$500,000 to several areas to improve, for example, drinking water in Rome and the sewer system in Crawfordville
- The “Youth Services” category funded several after-school programs, such as \$75,000 for the “Positive Steps” program in Columbus. There were also several projects aimed at preventing or reducing juvenile crime, such as the \$150,000 allocated for the Truancy Intervention Project in Atlanta.

In some cases the text of the spending bill leaves the exact purpose of an earmark unclear. For instance, Nearly every earmark in the “Health Care” category was awarded to a hospital or other health care organization, but is described only as being “for facilities and equipment.” Other examples include \$500,000 allocated to Alma, Georgia “for business and infrastructure development” and \$200,000 allocated to the City of Moultrie Police Department with no purpose specified at all. Such open-ended language implies that the recipients of these earmarks likely have considerable discretion in how to spend the money they receive.

Table 4 identifies the type of organization which received the money allocated by each earmark. Once again, the dominant recipient is the military. Over half of the earmarks allocated for military spending went directly to the U.S. military, representing most of the state’s most lucrative earmarks. Most of the earmarks going directly to the military were in the Military Construction appropriations bill, and are directed to either Fort Stewart or Fort Benning, with a small minority going elsewhere. On the other hand, a significant fraction of military earmarks were allocated to private corporations, primarily for the purposes of developing a new technology. Altogether, military earmarks accounted for 14 of the 15 earmarks which went to private, for-profit corporations. Other military earmarks went to the Georgia Air National Guard (counted under the State of Georgia in Table 4), and various universities to sponsor research with military applications.

After the military, the next most prominent recipients of earmarks were federal agencies. This group was led by the Army Corps of Engineers, which received funding from 22 earmarks to do work on Georgia waterways.⁹ Other federal agencies receiving funds for Georgia-related projects include the US Forest Service, the National Park Service, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Federal Highway Administration. State agencies also received earmarked money from the federal government. Those receiving funds included the Georgia Air National Guard as

⁹ The Army Corps of Engineers is part of the United States Army and thus, of course, the military. However, I counted it as a separate federal agency for the purposes of tallying earmarks because their earmarks did not come from the Defense appropriations bill, but from the Energy and Water bill. Moreover, at least within the state of Georgia, all of the ACE’s earmarks provided funding for civilian projects.

previously mentioned, the Georgia Soil and Water and Conservation Commission, the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, the Georgia Maritime Trade Center Authority, and the Georgia Soil and Water Conservation Commission.

Cities and counties also received a substantial number of earmarks. Local government units were the recipients of 62 earmarks, or over 25% of all of Georgia's earmarks, though collectively those earmarks were worth only \$25.4 million. Thus the average value of earmarks going to local government is small: \$500,000 for cities and \$300,000 for counties. However, a wide range of local governments did receive funding for such priorities as economic development, law enforcement, emergency preparedness, water and sewer improvements, and improvements to roads, highways and even local airports in the case of Glynn, Crisp and Floyd counties. Several examples are offered above; others include \$300,000 allocated to the Berrien County Development Authority for improvements to a local industrial park, and \$200,000 allocated to the Augusta Housing and Community Development Department to construct a community center.

Finally, a fraction of earmarks went to hospitals, universities and other nonprofit organizations. The language indicating the purpose of the earmarks directed toward hospitals was, as discussed above, often very vague. These grants went to such organizations such as Grady Health System in Atlanta, Bacon County Hospital in Alma, Gordon Hospital in Calhoun, and the Phoebe Putney Health System in Albany and range from \$100,000 to \$1 million. Universities received grants for a wide range of purposes. For instance, the Georgia Institute of Technology, Mercer College, and Columbus State University each received grants to perform research with military applications; the University of Georgia received several grants promoting agricultural research; and Armstrong Atlantic State University and Atlanta Christian College received grants for curriculum development. Lastly, a range of nonprofit organizations received earmarks for educational purposes or for family and/or youth services. For instance, the Southwestern Judicial Circuit Family Violence Council, Inc., in Americus received \$75,000 to hire a Domestic Violence Advocate; the Women's Sports Foundation of Atlanta received \$100,000 to promote girls sports leagues; and the Tubman African American Museum in Macon received \$250,000 toward its construction. Ten individual earmarks, ranging from \$75,000 to \$250,000, went to nonprofits to fund after-school or truancy prevention programs.

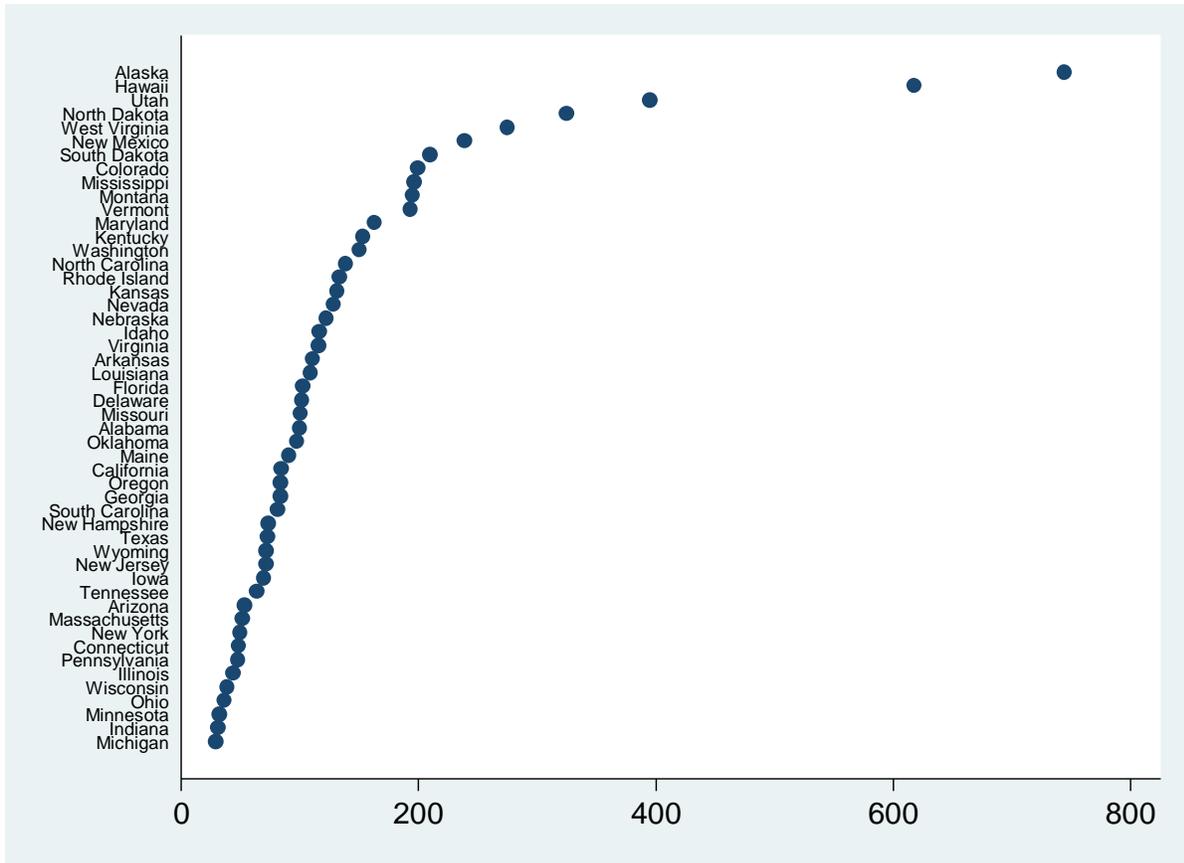
Conclusion

Earmarks remain a controversial part of the federal appropriations process. Critics charge that earmarks allocate money politically rather than based on merit, which leads to less-deserving projects being funded. Critics also charge that earmarks lead to quid-pro-quo exchanges between members of Congress and campaign donors. However, despite critics' repeated attempts to abolish them, other commentators perceive them as being useful tools for allocating funds to deserving recipients. Recent studies have begun to present evidence that earmarking is related to campaign fundraising: members who place more earmarks into spending bills raise more money toward re-election (Gordon and Rocca 2010, Lazarus 2010a). There is also evidence that earmarks are also directly related to Congress members' vote shares when they seek re-election (Crespin and Finochiarro 2010). Whether these linkages provide evidence for critics' charges remains open for debate. What is more certain is that members of Congress themselves are the only actors who have the authority to do away with earmarking. As a result, the practice is likely going to be a part of the appropriations process for some time to come.

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FIGURE 1
Per Capita Earmarks Spending, by State



	Party	District	Earmarks	Dollars (millions)	Ideological Rank (House of Reps)
Jack Kingston	Republican	1	36	\$54.3	386
Sanford Bishop	Democrat	2	56	\$43.9	202
Lynn Westmoreland	Republican	3	0		410
Hank Johnson	Democrat	4	17	\$16.2	63
John Lewis	Democrat	5	24	\$18.5	15
Tom Price	Republican	6	0		407
John Linder	Republican	7	2	\$2.4	422
Jim Marshall	Democrat	8	32	\$36.5	238
Nathan Deal*	Republican	9	4	\$3.5	417
Paul Broun	Republican	10	0		432
Phil Gingrey	Republican	11	17	\$10.7	373
John Barrow	Democrat	12	14	\$6.6	249
David Scott	Democrat	13	26	\$6.9	188
Saxby Chambliss	Republican	Senate	93	\$650	
Johnny Isakson	Republican	Senate	45	\$61.6	
Barak Obama	Democrat	President	55	\$638	
Total			226	\$787.4	

**Retired to run for governor. Replaced by Tom Graves.*

FIGURE 2
House Member Ideology and Earmark Procurement, 2010

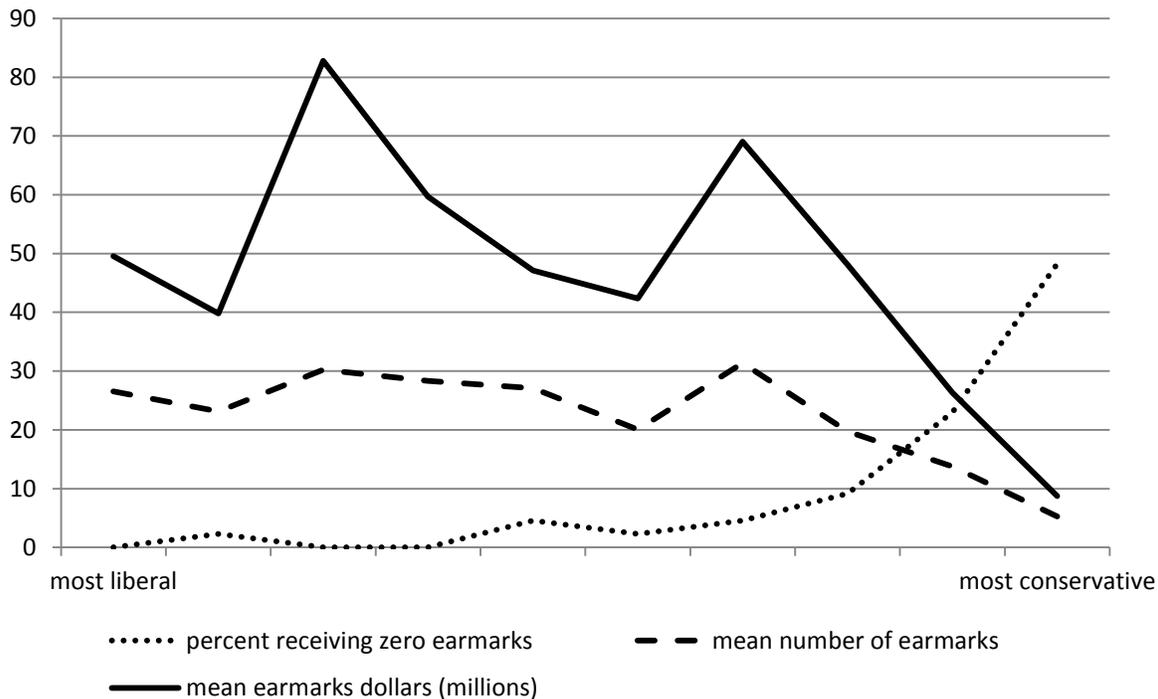


TABLE 2			
Categories of Earmarked Spending			
	Earmarks	Dollars (Millions)	Mean Value (Millions)
Military	68	\$680.4	\$10.0
Water & Waterway Management	15	\$30.5	\$2.0
Economic Development	12	\$18.7	\$1.6
Mass Transit	4	\$8.5	\$2.1
Transportation	14	\$7.4	\$0.5
Health Care	20	\$7.1	\$0.4
Parks & Recreation	7	\$7.0	\$1.0
Agriculture	8	\$5.8	\$0.7
Environment	9	\$4.4	\$0.5
Education	10	\$4.2	\$0.4
Law Enforcement	20	\$4.1	\$0.2
Urban Water/Sewer	7	\$3.0	\$0.4
Youth Services	16	\$2.3	\$0.1
Emergency Response	8	\$1.5	\$0.2
Family Services	8	\$1.1	\$0.2
Total	227	\$786	

TABLE 3			
Recipients of Earmarked Spending			
	Earmarks	Dollars (millions)	Mean Value (millions)
United States Military	38	\$622.5	\$16.4
Federal Agencies	32	\$58.9	\$1.8
Universities	30	\$27.6	\$0.9
Corporations	15	\$23.4	\$1.6
Cities	31	\$17.0	\$0.5
State of Georgia	9	\$13.5	\$1.5
Counties	31	\$8.4	\$0.3
Hospitals/Health Organizations	14	\$6.9	\$0.5
Other Nonprofit Organizations	24	\$5.8	\$0.2
Total	224*	784.1*	

**Totals differ from those in Table 2 because in three cases specific recipients could not be identified*