

Washer Not Spinning?
Fridge Not Cold Enough?

Drum group wins first key vote

PANEL OKS FUNDS: Owens skirts ban for health care agency

By **MARC HELLER**
TIMES WASHINGTON CORRESPONDENT
THURSDAY, MAY 12, 2011

WASHINGTON — A House panel took an early step Wednesday toward saving the Fort Drum Regional Health Planning Organization, approving \$500,000 for community health efforts that fit the description of the north country organization.

ARTICLE OPTIONS
AAA
SHARE

The House Armed Services Committee agreed to the funding as part of an annual bill outlining defense programs. Rep. William L. Owens, D-Plattsburgh, proposed the provision in consultation with the FDRHPO.

Without the funding, the organization loses the primary source of money for its operating budget. It is a partnership among area hospitals to provide service to the Fort Drum community; Fort Drum is the biggest Army post without its own hospital.

By approving a general description, but not specifying the organization, lawmakers adhered to a ban on hometown projects known as earmarks.

The organization was created several years ago through an earmark secured by then-Rep. John M. McHugh, R-Pierrepont Manor, now secretary of the Army. It survived this year on grants and other sources of money after Congress agreed to forgo such projects, while warning that its long term viability depended on federal funding.

Mr. Owens said the money will be awarded based on a competition but that the provision was written in a way that makes the north country organization the clear candidate. The secretary of the Army will make the determination, he said.

Mr. Owens said he hopes the money goes to a place where it can be put to the best use, which in his office's view is the FDRHPO. "It's as safe a path as we can possibly walk," Mr. Owens said.

The creative funding solution for FDRHPO was one reflection of the committee's search for ways to fund home-district priorities without running afoul of the earmark ban. Another came through a handful of

Over already?

...I was just getting comfortable!
Experience the new
3T
MAGNETOM Verio
MRI
- now available at
Massena Memorial Hospital

(315) 769-4228

You may use this copy for your personal, non-commercial use only. Redistribution or repurposing without express written permission of the Watertown Daily Times is strictly prohibited. Copyright. Watertown Daily Times, Inc., Watertown, NY. All rights reserved.

vaguely worded military construction items the committee also approved Wednesday, specifying dollar amounts and program areas but not specific installations.

Thus Mr. Owens secured \$10 million for utilities and ground improvements within the Army, without any mention of the "alert holding area" he had in mind for Fort Drum, as well as \$4 million in additional funding for cybersecurity research, without specifying Rome Lab, which would be eligible to compete for the money, a spokesman for the congressman said.

An alert holding area is a facility to help prepare equipment for deployment; The Army has sought one at Fort Drum for several years, through requests made by Mr. Owens and, before him, Mr. McHugh. The estimated cost last year was \$6.7 million.

With money available, even if indirectly, the Army would be free to direct funding to Fort Drum.

And while lawmakers have spoken of saving money in the Defense Department, they did a considerable amount of simply moving money around, creating a transfer fund within the military budget so lawmakers could save in one area while increasing spending in others.

Wednesday's session lasted all day and was expected to last well into the evening, with debates on the military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy repeal and treatment of terrorism detainees expected to heat up Wednesday night.

Next will be House consideration. The Senate has not announced the schedule for consideration of its own version of the legislation.

The only projects specified at Fort Drum are the Obama administration's four requested projects, totaling \$33.7 million. They are \$15.7 million for a medical clinic at Drum, \$4.7 million for an addition to a dental clinic, \$5.7 million for an ammunition supply point and \$7.6 million for a new chapel.

The dance around military construction projects also helps avert President Barack Obama's pledge to veto bills that contain earmarks. Mr. Owens was one of several members of the committee who proposed, and won approval of, 22 conspicuously vague military construction amendments to the bill.

Lawmakers also agreed to a proposal by Mr. Owens to boost funding by \$2.5 million for sniper rifle modifications on Army combat vehicles.

On broader issues, the committee agreed to keep alive an alternative engine for a joint strike fighter, which Congress has voted to kill. The committee agreed to let the contractors on the engine, General Electric and Rolls Royce, use Defense Department facilities for continued development as long as companies cover the cost on their own — something they have promised to do.

The provision on the fighter jet gained overwhelming support on the panel, including from Mr. Owens.

[SHOW COMMENTS](#) (0)