



STATE OF OKLAHOMA
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Gann Bill Seeks to Expose and End Secretive Practice of Verbal Earmarks

OKLAHOMA CITY - Rep. Tom Gann, R- Inola today announced the release of the "Verbal Earmarks Transparency Act of 2024" The Act, HB2967, will require state agency officials to disclose attempts by legislators to enforce "verbal earmarks."

A verbal earmark occurs when a powerful legislator, such as an appropriation official, attempts to direct state agency officials on how to spend recently appropriated money. This practice contrasts with written earmarks, where the agency's obligations are spelled out in an appropriations' bill for all to see.

"All earmarks are always bad policy, through which non-meritorious pork projects take place; but, at the very least, written earmarks are visible to the public, and the people of Oklahoma can hold their legislators accountable for their vote. Verbal earmarks take this bad policy to a new level. This practice allows a few powerful legislators to direct the spending of state money, and worse, because this is done behind closed doors, the people of Oklahoma have no ability to know that the spending came at the request of a powerful legislator.

The shady practice of verbal earmarks does a great disservice to the public, to the state agencies, and to the majority of legislators who have neither the inclination nor the means to participate in this shady practice," Gann said.

The issue, normally hidden from the public, finally received some scant public purview last year when Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt mentioned the practice in his Executive Order 2023-23 calling for the October 2023 special session. Stitt expressed frustration after brave agency officials explained that certain legislators were attempting to direct the spending of money even though no legislation had been approved to direct the funding in the manner demanded by the powerful legislators.

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If HB2967 is approved, Gann believes the required public disclosure of these requests will give agency whistleblowers the necessary support to stand up to the verbal earmarks and to shine the light of day on the abuse.

This legislation represents the latest in Gann's efforts to prevent the ongoing centralization of power within the offices of a limited few, powerful legislators.

"The legislature functions best when its responsibilities and duties are spread out to all legislators in a transparent manner by which the public can hold them to account. The current system, which concentrates power within just a few legislators and closed-door processes that are not open to public purview, does a great disservice to the vast majority of legislators, who do not have these powers, and the voters who need to know how their money is being spent and how the laws are being made that impact all of their lives.

These bad policies are creating a fertile breeding ground for corruption and malfeasance, and it's our duty as legislators and as Oklahomans to bring these policies to an end," Gann explained. "Oklahoma deserves an ethical government."

Gann's legislation now goes to the House Speaker's office, where it will be assigned to a committee, at the Speaker's discretion.

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Tom Gann serves District 8 in the Oklahoma House of Representatives. His district includes portions of Roger, Mayes, and Wagoner Counties