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Supporters of a proposed aviation museum in Camillus didn't have to estimate how many annual visitors it would attract to convince a lawmaker to recommend the project receive a \$100,000 state grant.

Nor did they have to compete with others around New York who might also want to celebrate their own local history.

Instead, a group of more than a dozen town leaders took preliminary drawings, a budget proposal and a list of potential donors to Sen. John DeFrancisco. They explained how model airplanes, photographs and other mementos from Central New York's first commercial airport are hidden in a few people's basements rather than displayed for the public.

That pitch was enough to launch the Amboy Airport Museum into the running for \$100,000 from a new, \$1.1 billion pot of borrowed money that New York's political leaders will spend and taxpayers will repay.

■ **INSIDE:**
How CNY's state lawmakers want to spread around their shares. A-8

Gov. Andrew Cuomo quietly created the new pot in 2013 by inserting it into a budget bill. State lawmakers approved it. Each year since then the pot has grown, so that now Cuomo and legislative leaders have given themselves the authority to borrow up to \$1.1 billion for yet-to-be-named projects.

The early projects, hand-picked by lawmakers and Cuomo, are starting to come to light as the borrowing begins. So far, the state has borrowed \$66 million for this program, according to the state comptroller's office. That means there's more than \$1 billion — plus interest — to go. New York income tax payers will foot the bills.

This "State and Municipal Facility Program," or SAM for short, is where Cuomo went for \$15 million when he decided to build a new film studio in DeWitt and to spend \$5 million to help CBS build a new studio for Stephen Colbert. It's also the source of state money recommended by Central New York lawmakers to help build youth athletic fields in DeWitt, fix water problems in Tully, save the ice rink at Meacham Park in Syracuse, build a better ice rink for the Syracuse Crunch and make improvements to the Kallet Civic Center in Oneida.

New York is gearing up to borrow tens of millions of dollars for new generators for town halls, police security cameras, park gazebos, pole barns, fire trucks and police cars across the state. Syracuse is



WELCOME TO NEW PORK

ALBANY BORROWS ANOTHER \$1 BILLION TO SATISFY ITS APPETITE FOR TASTY LOCAL GRANTS

supposed to get one of the biggest allocations so far — \$10 million toward fixing the city's crumbling water system.

The budget laws creating the program say qualifying projects must meet two main objectives: Each proposal must save or add jobs, or it must pay for a capital expense for a government entity. Nothing in the law describes how the money should be distributed among projects or how state leaders should measure the necessity of each project.

That means nowhere in the process does anyone measure whether water system needs are more dire in Syracuse than in Albany, or whether Buffalo might be in greater need of

\$100,000 AVIATION MUSEUM FRIENDS OF A HISTORIC CAMILLUS AIRPORT MADE THE CASE TO SEN. JOHN DEFRANCISCO FOR 'A LITTLE SEED MONEY'

the \$13 million going to Rochester to help buy police cars.

Lawmakers defend the borrowing. They say each project is vetted by legislative staff and state agencies before the money is borrowed through the state's Dormitory

ALBANY, PAGE A-8

“It’s kind of nice some of these funding opportunities are coming back.”

— CAMILLUS PARKS DIRECTOR ERIC BACON

FROM PAGE ONE

ALBANY BORROWS \$1 BILLION FOR PORK



ALBANY, FROM PAGE A-1

Authority. They also say using state debt to pay for the projects keeps the costs off of local budgets — and off of local property tax bills.

“As long as there is disclosure and everybody is required to show what the hell they are doing with the money, I don’t see the problem,” DeFrancisco, R-Syracuse, said. “I don’t think there is anything wrong with this process.”

Critics say SAM grants are a disappointing return to political pork. When Cuomo took office in 2011, he challenged communities and regions across the state to compete for this type of money.

Now Cuomo, through his budget office, holds the ultimate approval when it comes to borrowing money through SAM, according to the budget legislation.

So instead of pooling the money into large statewide projects that could rebuild the transportation network, state leaders are dividing up an enormous pie of debt into little slices. That creates more ribbon-cuttings and good headlines, but does little to fix big infrastructure problems, according to financial analysts at the Empire Center in Albany.

“Why are my grandchildren going to be paying for your fire trucks?” asked E.J. McMahon, a conservative fiscal watchdog at the Empire Center who first brought attention to the fund hidden in the state’s budget. “This is still not the way to pay for them.”

Recipients of the grants — almost always local governments — are thankful that Albany has reopened a spigot to help localities with infrastructure and quality-of-life improvements.

“The residents of the town of Camillus are residents of New York state,” says Eric Bacon, director of Camillus town parks and one of the aviation museum supporters. “And if they’re going to have this money that they are giving statewide, why not the town of Camillus?”

UNEVEN DISTRIBUTION

It’s unclear whether each local government — or each lawmaker, for that matter — has equal or proportionate access to the SAM fund. What is clear is that lawmakers in the majority party in the state Senate and Assembly have nominated many more projects than those in the minority. And it’s Cuomo, ultimately, who controls whether anyone gets money or not.

In the Syracuse area, legislators of different parties, and in different houses, received varying direction on the amount of money they could spend in their district. The only standard? Each nominated project must cost at least \$50,000. Lawmakers said they did not know of any upper limit for each loan.

In the New York State Senate, Republicans are in control and have nominated dozens of projects for SAM money. Their partners, the Independent Democratic Conference (Sen. David Valesky, D-Oneida, is a member), also have millions of dollars’ worth



Top, a Dey’s truck receives packages at the Amboy Airport. (Onondaga Historical Association)

Robert Feyl explains how local leaders want to build an aviation museum at Reed Webster Park in Camillus, which is also near the Erie Canal trail. Feyl and others hope people using the trail will also stop at the museum. The town is in line for a \$100,000 grant from state taxpayers to help build the museum.

of projects in the works. Other Senate Democrats say they have no access to the money so far.

Over in the New York State Assembly, Al Stirpe, D-Cicero, said he received a letter from Sheldon Silver, when Silver was still Assembly speaker, saying Stirpe could nominate up to \$1.5 million for projects in his suburban Syracuse district.

“I’m sure there are members who get a lot more money for things,” Stirpe said, noting that Magnarelli has requested the \$10 million for Syracuse’s water pipes. “I’m focused on what I need and trying to get as much as I can to fill that need.”

Assemblyman Gary Finch, R-Springport, said he was told by Republican leaders within the last two weeks that he could nominate two to three projects from his district, which spans four counties. Each project could be a max of \$100,000.

Finch learned from a Post-Standard reporter that the money would be borrowed. He generally votes against the Capital Projects portion of the budget, which included this SAM program.

“Philosophically, I have problems with it,” he said of adding to the state’s debt. At the same time, he added: “I don’t want to deny the people in my district from having a piece of it. I don’t want to turn the money down.”

PICKING THE WINNERS

DeFrancisco said he sought out project ideas from the towns and villages he represents in Onondaga and Cayuga counties. He sorted through them, in one case rejecting an idea to use the money to repaint the inside of a water tower as an operational, rather than capital, expense. He nominated nearly two dozen projects, most ranging from \$50,000 to \$200,000 each.

Stirpe nominated the village of Tully for a \$500,000 grant to help with a new water system, a bigger expense in a rural area of Onondaga County. “They kept telling me they could get loans but

not grants,” he said.

Magnarelli is using SAM loans to send \$1.7 million to the Hotel Syracuse renovation project. The money, Magnarelli said, was authorized for the project back in 2008, before the hotel even had a developer or SAM existed. In more recent years, state officials decided to pay that \$1.7 million out of this new SAM program, he said.

That’s one of the few examples of SAM money going into a private project, which is allowed if the investment helps create or retain jobs. Magnarelli has helped steer millions of dollars in state money to the hotel renovation, arguing state investment is needed to boost convention business in Syracuse and Onondaga County.

Magnarelli also has recommended the \$10 million for Syracuse’s crumbling water system.

“This is not pork,” Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie, D-Bronx, said this summer about the windfall. “This is about giving the city of Syracuse money to help their infrastructure.”

DÉJÀ VU

After the lawmakers select the projects to nominate, written applications from each project go to legislative staff for review, lawmakers say.

From there, the requests go to Cuomo’s budget office — the place with the real power to approve or reject, according to McMahon.

If all this sounds familiar, it’s because state leaders had a very similar system with slush funds in the past.

Back then, legislative leaders and then-Gov. George Pataki had agreements on how to split the money. Now Cuomo holds the reins, McMahon said.

In the old slush programs, taxpayer-backed loans could go to non-profit organizations — some of which had ties to lawmakers or to campaign donors.

That type of broader borrow-

ing is limited under this new plan. Now the law specifies what types of government or public agencies — from libraries and colleges to fire departments and ambulance corps — can receive the money.

The Dormitory Authority is doing the brunt of the borrowing for lawmakers. That means staff at the public authority review paperwork, including a questionnaire that asks, among other things, whether the lawmaker nominating the project has any financial interest in the project. Concerning answers can disqualify a project, according to the authority.

With the Dormitory Authority’s OK, the applications go back to Cuomo’s budget office for the final go-ahead.

Still, no one along the way compares the requests with other needs across the state. That’s part of the problem, McMahon said. “It’s throwing \$1 billion at the wall,” he says.

THE AMBOY AIRPORT

The town of Camillus is in line to use some of that splatter for its proposed aviation museum.

In the late 1920s, the city of Syracuse turned an alfalfa field in the hamlet of Amboy into the first commercial airport in Onondaga County. Charles Lindbergh and Amelia Earhart soon visited, as they did at many airports across the nation.

But Amboy stood out among the nation’s early airports, advocates for the museum say. Beacon and runway lights — now ordinary sights on runways — were first tested and used at Amboy, according to supporters of the museum.

“The ramifications of the project go beyond the town of Camillus,” said Tom Kehoskie, the town’s former parks director who is now one of the advocates behind building the museum.

Plus, Kehoskie said, the town isn’t asking the state for \$500,000, the full estimated cost of building museum. “We’re looking for a little seed money,” he said. “We’re not looking for some government agency to give us the total bill. We don’t want a check for half a million dollars.”

The town of Camillus and its property tax payers aren’t paying a dime toward the museum. When asked why state taxpayers should pay for a local museum, Camillus Town Supervisor Mary Ann Coogan paused.

“That’s a good question,” she said at first. “It’s hard for me to answer that one.”

She and other advocates added they believe this small museum would draw tourists from outside of Camillus and Onondaga County, and thus serve as a boon to state taxpayers. The town’s Erie Canal park draws more than 200,000 visitors a year, according to town records. A local museum celebrating the Octagon House sees about 1,400 people a year.

The Camillus museum backers have not done a market study to find out how many people might come to the aviation museum.

The town’s application for the \$100,000 grant is now at the Dormitory Authority for consider-

CNY proposals

These are the proposed grants for projects in Central New York recommended by state lawmakers through a new, \$1.1 billion pool of money they created. New York will borrow the money and will use tax revenues to repay the loans. Some of these grants are in the final stages of review by state officials. Others are awaiting review.



ASSEMBLYMAN BILL MAGEE, D-NELSON: \$1.1 million

\$100,000 for improved sidewalks and lighting in Cooperstown
\$250,000 for the Kallet Civic Center in Oneida,
\$250,000 for a fire truck in Oneonta
\$500,000 to replace a bridge in Madison County



ASSEMBLYMAN BILL MAGNARELLI, D-SYRACUSE: \$2.2 million

\$1.7 million for interior redevelopment at the Hotel Syracuse
\$500,000 to improve the ice rink and other upgrades at Meachem Field Park in Syracuse



FORMER ASSEMBLYMAN SAM ROBERTS, D-SYRACUSE: \$975,000

\$500,000 for improvements at Onondaga, Thornden and Homer Wheaton parks in Syracuse
\$250,000 for a new walking trail in DeWitt
\$125,000 for improved restrooms and pavilion at Electronics Park in Salina
\$100,000 for the new Willis Carrier Recreation Center in DeWitt



ASSEMBLYMAN AL STIRPE, D-CICERO, \$625,000

\$500,000 for water system improvements, new fire hydrants, building improvements in village of Tully
\$125,000 for wastewater improvements in Minoa



JOHN DEFRANCISCO, R-SYRACUSE, \$1,855,000

\$75,000 to renovate Clifford Field House in Auburn
\$50,000 to renovate school playground in Baldwinsville
\$50,000 to build new cold storage pole barn in Brutus

\$100,000 to build new aviation museum in town of Camillus
\$100,000 to replace pool with a spray park in town of Camillus
\$50,000 to pave Sayra and Brick Church roads in Cato
\$50,000 to build a new salt shed in Cato
\$150,000 for road repairs in Clay
\$50,000 for community gardens in Clay
\$110,000 to renovate the town garage in DeWitt
\$130,000 for the Willis Carrier Recreation Center in DeWitt
\$140,000 to build a town pavilion in Elbridge
\$50,000 for a new pole barn in Ira
\$200,000 for town hall improvements and a new generator in Manlius
\$50,000 for improvements to park in Marcellus
\$100,000 to renovate the senior center in Onondaga to make it accessible for people with disabilities
\$50,000 for two new dry hydrants in Skaneateles
\$50,000 for the Woods Road Park in Solway
\$50,000 for improvements to the highway garage in Spafford
\$100,000 to renovate the athletic field at Schiller Park in Syracuse
\$50,000 for new sidewalks in Van Buren
\$50,000 for a new generator for the Warners Fire District
\$50,000 for a new compost facility in Weedsport



SEN. DAVID VALESKY, D-ONEIDA, \$1.7 MILLION

\$50,000 to enlarge drainage conveyances on Ridge and Wright roads in Cazenovia
\$100,000 for a community playground in Cicero
\$50,000 to upgrade the Kirkland Police Department and senior center

\$50,000 to build a pole barn in Kirkland
\$50,000 toward a new highway building in LaFayette
\$50,000 to start a replacement sidewalk program in Oneida
\$100,000 to bring the War Memorial Arena in compliance with AHL and NHL requirements
\$100,000 to remove and separate a section of the Mattydale/Pitcher Hill Sewer District
\$100,000 to put a security camera at East Fayette Street and Columbus Avenue in Syracuse
\$50,000 to put a bike path walkway along Onondaga Creek Boulevard
\$100,000 to put in new sewer lines and storm water drains in Syracuse
\$100,000 to improve Syracuse city pools
\$750,000 for improvements in Syracuse city parks, including McKinley, Meachem, Onondaga, Skiddy and Sunnycrest
\$50,000 for a new park in Tully

ation, according to state records.

“This is just politics,” McMahon said of state officials funding various projects in their districts. “This is meant to make you feel good. If you’ve got a local park, pay for your own park.”

WILL THIS BORROWING CONTINUE?

McMahon argues that New York income tax payers shouldn’t be on the hook for hundreds of little projects like the museum in Camillus. Instead, he argues, the state should pool its financial resources to tackle big issues — highways, bridges and, yes, aging urban water systems.

“I think that’s a valid point,” Valesky said, but he added he’s not sure it has to be one or the other — small projects versus big ones. “I think this is one form of an infrastructure program. It’s not the only way of doing things.”

Lawmakers said they didn’t know whether the money available through SAM would continue to grow, as it has the past two years. McMahon, who has been watching New York budget decisions for decades, believes it will.

In Camillus, town leaders are pleased they have more opportunity from Albany to chip away at local projects.

“It’s kind of nice that some of these funding opportunities are coming back,” said Bacon, the Camillus parks director.