

WNY fares well in congressional spending bills

Several items were targeted for cuts in Trump's plan, restored in final bill

By Jerry Zremski
NEWS WASHINGTON BUREAU CHIEF

WASHINGTON – The federal spending bills that Congress was supposed to finish before the first frost finally got passed the week before Christmas – and they include plenty of gifts for Western New York.

Many of the region's top federal priorities – from Great Lakes programs to home heating aid for the poor – got significant funding in the massive, two-bill, \$1.4 trillion spending package, which funds the federal government through Sept. 30. That's largely because both parties in Congress flatly rejected much of what President Trump, a Republican, had called for in the fiscal 2020 budget he proposed early this year.

“This package of appropriations bills includes resources for critical domestic priorities that our entire nation will benefit from receiving,” said Sen. Richard Shelby, the Alabama Republican who chairs the Senate Appropriations Committee.

Rep. Brian Higgins, a Buffalo Democrat who serves on the House Budget Committee, agreed.

“While imperfect, this budget represents a compromise that continues government operations, programs, investments and opportunities important to Western New York,” Higgins said.

Here's a look at the items in the final spending package that are of particular interest in the Buffalo area:

Army Corps

Buffalo depends on the Army Corps of Engineers to maintain its waterways – and Trump wanted to cut funding for the Army Corps by a third at what would have been the worst possible time for the city. Congress refused to do that.

Instead, Congress boosted funding for the Army Corps by 9.3%, to \$7.65 billion. That's important to Buffalo because a key Army Corps structure – a breakwall designed to prevent flooding in LaSalle Park and downtown Buffalo – sustained millions of dollars in damage in this year's Halloween storms.

Trump last week declared a federal emergency in the wake of those storms, but federal disaster aid wouldn't cover damages to a federal facility like the breakwall. That being the case, the Army Corps will have to find its own funding for that repair project – and now, thanks to the spending agreement, more money might be available for such work.

THE BUFFALO NEWS

BUFFALONEWS.COM

Copyright 2019

MONDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2019

Printing Mailed New York since 1802

FINAL EDITION

Congressional Democrats rejected Trump's call for cuts in Army Corps funding back in May. The top House Democrat overseeing Army Corps funding, Rep. Marcy Kaptur of Ohio, dismissed Trump's suggested cuts at the time as "drastic" and "shortsighted."

Great Lakes funding

Trump's spending plan proposed cutting funding for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative – one of the engines of Buffalo's waterfront revival – from \$300 million to \$30 million. But Congress ended up giving the program \$320 million – \$20 million more in than in fiscal 2019.

The spending plan also sets aside \$1.64 billion for the main federal program aimed at helping localities modernize their wastewater facilities. That's \$55 million less than in the previous year. But Congress largely offset that cut with an additional \$24.5 million in water infrastructure grants to small and disadvantaged communities and an extra \$28 million for municipal grants for sewer and stormwater infrastructure projects.

Similarly, Congress allocated \$1.64 billion for the Clean Water State Revolving Fund, down \$55 million from 2019, while adding \$19.5 million in funding to combat lead in drinking water and another \$3 million for a drinking water grant program.

"This budget is good news for the Great Lakes and the 30 million Americans who depend on them for their drinking water, jobs, and way of life," said Laura Rubin, director of the Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition.

In addition, the legislation requires the Coast Guard to put in place a plan to build a new icebreaker for the Great Lakes. The Lake Carriers' Association says a new icebreaker is needed because most of the existing icebreakers are 40 years old or more, and because the dwindling fleet of 11 current icebreakers left 17 vessels trapped in ice for several days on Lake Superior last winter.

LIHEAP

The Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program, which helps nearly 70,000 Erie County families with their winter heat bills, won \$3.74 billion in funding. That's \$50 million more than what was allocated for the program in fiscal 2019. It's also a total rebuke of Trump, who suggested eliminating the program entirely in his spending plan.

Snow belt lawmakers from both parties insisted on funding the program generously.

"No family should have to choose between heat or eat in Vermont or anywhere in America," said Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont, the Democrat who serves as vice chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee and who pushed for the additional heating aid.

CDBG

The Community Development Block Grant program is the federal government's main way of investing in local communities. It provided \$13.7 million in funding for projects around Buffalo this

THE BUFFALO NEWS

BUFFALONEWS.COM

Copyright 2019

MONDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2019

Printing: Buffalo News Print since 1802

FINAL EDITION

year, as well as another \$8.6 million split between Erie County, Niagara Falls and the towns of Amherst, Cheektowaga and Tonawanda.

That funding should increase in fiscal 2020, given that Congress expanded funding for the program by 2.9%, to \$3.4 billion.

Trump had suggested eliminating the program, but Democrats – who control the House – insisted that it be expanded.

“I am proud that we were able to come together, negotiate our differences, and reach a bipartisan agreement that makes investments to strengthen our nation and give every American a better chance at a better life,” said House Appropriations Committee Chairwoman Nita Lowey, a Democrat from White Plains.

West Valley

The **West Valley Demonstration Project**, a nuclear waste treatment site in Cattaraugus County, won \$75.2 million in funding, up from \$75 million in 2019 and up significantly from the mid-2010s, when it received only about \$60 million annually.

“Each year that the **West Valley Demonstration Project** goes underfunded, the amount of time and money it will take to decontaminate and remove the radioactive waste increases,” said Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer, who announced the funding along with his Democratic colleague from New York, Sen. Kirsten E. Gillibrand. “So this \$75 million is a positive step in the right direction.”

The annual battles over funding **West Valley** are likely to be less difficult in the coming years, too. That’s because Congress recently approved legislation sponsored by Rep. Tom Reed, a Republican from Corning, that sets the base annual level of **West Valley** funding at \$75 million a year through 2026.

While Congress will have to allocate that funding annually, the baseline authorization will guide Congress toward the amount of money the Department of Energy says is necessary to operate **West Valley**.

Erie Canal

The Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor looked as if it was about to be starved of federal funds, but thanks to the spending bills passed by Congress, the canalway’s federal funding cap actually grew from \$12 million to \$14 million.

The canalway was close to hitting that \$12 million authorization cap, meaning Congress would not be able, under the two-step federal funding process, to allocate enough funds to keep the canalway fully operating next year. But because Congress boosted the authorization cap, the canalway got its full 2020 appropriation of \$709,000.

THE BUFFALO NEWS

BUFFALONEWS.COM

Copyright 2019

MONDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2019

Serving Western New York since 1807

FINAL EDITION

“The Erie Canal is one of New York State’s most important historic treasures. The legacy of the canal helps drive millions of dollars for upstate New York, promoting tourism for the communities along the corridor,” Gillibrand said.



Top, Bird Island Pier was badly damaged by Halloween storms, but a boost in Army Corps funding will help with repairs. Above, boaters ply the waters of the Erie Canal. The canalway’s federal funding cap was increased to \$14 million. Mark Mulville/News file photos