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## The other side of earmarks

**Donald Schwartz** There is much talk about federal earmarks these days, including coverage in the Centre Daily Times and a constant, negative drumbeat from presidential candidate John McCain.

Everyone hears about the horror stories, such as funding for the so-called “Bridge to Nowhere.” But if you dig a little deeper, there is another side to earmarks: the good side — the side that makes life better in Centre County and across Pennsylvania.

I have been working for RCAP Solutions in Pennsylvania for almost 17 years. My office was originally in Williamsport and has been on North Atherton Street in State College since 2003.

RCAP Solutions is a comprehensive, nonprofit community-development organization that focuses on improving the lives of individuals and communities. We are one of six regional partners in the national RCAP network, which serves all 50 states, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

In Pennsylvania, we concentrate on technical assistance to small, low-income, rural communities seeking to develop or improve drinking-water and sewer systems or those requiring management training. The need is overwhelming and growing every day. The cost of owning and operating one of these systems has exploded in recent years.

Who can a small community turn to for impartial advice and guidance when faced with a state Department of Environmental Protection order to construct sewage facilities?

Who can a small community seek out for assistance in developing water and sewer budgets and rates that are self-sustaining (and defend them at public meetings)?

Who can help volunteer community leaders in negotiating the maze of state and federal regulations concerning water and sewer systems?

Who can provide training to small communities on the most basic issues related to owning and operating a new multimillion-dollar drinking-water or sewer system after the government turns over the keys?

Finally, who can be trusted by the DEP to act as a third party in delicate contacts between small communities and environmental regulators?

The answer to all of these questions is RCAP Solutions. We are advocates for rural Pennsylvania.

Much of the funding for our environmental programs comes in the form of earmarks by Congress that direct several federal agencies to provide financial support. U.S. Rep. John

Peterson, R-Pleasantville, has been one of our strongest proponents and has consistently supported earmarks for the RCAP network.

Peterson's district is very large, very rural and has many communities in need of our services. We have worked with scores of them over the years to keep user rates as low as possible while protecting the environment and encouraging community development.

I would like to thank Peterson for his valuable efforts at the federal level and for his leadership and vision in support of our funding. I wish him the best in his upcoming retirement.

One of the communities I have assisted under our earmark funding, the village of Herminie in Westmoreland County, is featured in a national documentary on drinking water and sewer infrastructure issues that Penn State Public Broadcasting will release in the near future.

Hundreds of homes in Herminie currently discharge raw sewage directly into Little Sewickley Creek. Construction of a new sewer system and treatment plant will end this imminent health and environmental hazard.

There is a similar situation closer to home in Osceola Mills that is also going to be resolved as the result of assistance from RCAP Solutions.

Still think all earmarks are bad? There truly is another side — the side that provides local help for local residents.

I would not have kept this position if I felt that federal tax dollars were being wasted. Donald Schwartz is district director for RCAP Solutions in State College. He can be reached at [dschwartz@rcapsolutions.org](mailto:dschwartz@rcapsolutions.org).