

[East Valley Tribune](#)

Dennis Welch

Rep. Harry Mitchell, D-Ariz., wanted more than \$9 million in federal money to pay for special projects in Mesa. But the freshman Democrat lawmaker and the city will have to settle for a lot less.

As of Friday, Mitchell had secured \$1.6 million for projects Mesa can't afford, such as police training equipment, money for nursing programs and cash to expand runways at Williams Gateway Airport. He has another \$800,000 in requests pending. The rest have been rejected.

"Overall, the congressman is very happy with the funding requests he was able to secure," said Seth Scott, a spokesman for Mitchell. "We know we're not going to bat a thousand."

Historically, Mesa has operated on a tight budget. Last year, the city was forced to cut millions of dollars out of its operating budget, lay off dozens of employees and pull back on city services.

So, in some cases, city leaders look to Washington to make up for financial shortfalls or to offset costs in order to free up money that can be used in other areas. Mitchell said the city's largest request this year involved Williams Gateway Airport, viewed as a potential economic powerhouse for the region.

Mitchell, acting on Mesa's behalf, asked for \$5.7 million to expand the airport's taxiway system used to move planes between hangars and runways. The airport will add an additional 500,000 square feet of hangar space during the next 18 to 24 months. But Congress approved only \$1.3 million on Mitchell's request, an amount that has some Mesa leaders concerned.

"Look, I don't want to downplay the importance of what we're trying to do, but I understand Congress has a lot of requests this year," said Councilwoman Claudia Walters. "Of course, we'd love to see the feds step up."

Walters and other City Council members emphasized the importance of Williams Gateway to the future economic development and success of Mesa and the East Valley.

The local partnership that runs the airport is working to increase passenger airline traffic at the airport so that it can help relieve traffic at Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport. Williams Gateway traditionally has been a cargo hub, with a small portion of its business from passenger flights.

In addition to the airport, Mitchell also asked for \$650,000 for a virtual reality training program for Mesa police. However, Congress approved only \$200,000 for a Tactical Environment Simulator, a video-based program that simulates real-world situations for police officers.

Councilman Mike Whalen, a former Mesa police officer, said those types of training tools are very effective for the younger generation of officers used to training with video games.

The one request fully funded by Congress was a program at Mesa Community College that certifies internationally trained nurses who are not licensed in the United States. The Enfermeras en Escalera program, which was started in 2004, takes one year to complete and has been described as a fast, low-cost way to address the state's nursing shortage. The program will receive \$175,000 in federal money.

In total, Mitchell requested money for eight projects specifically tied to Mesa. But overall, the congressman was seeking \$261.8 million for 33 local projects.

The concept of earmarking money for local projects has been more closely scrutinized this year following several political scandals involving U.S. lawmakers who sponsored special projects that benefited their political cronies. Earmarks allow members of Congress to slip funding provisions into broader bills. The practice was one way that former Rep. Randy "Duke" Cunningham, R-Calif., used to steer contracts to his associates.

One of the loudest critics of earmarking in Washington is Rep. Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., whose district also cuts through Mesa. Last year, he offered 39 amendments to strike earmarks out of various appropriation bills. And he regularly sends out news releases alerting the media to the "egregious earmark" of the week.

Matthew Specht, a Flake spokesman, said the congressman has not offered an earmark request since 2001 - his first year in Congress.

"He feels that he can't be an effective critic of the system if he's asking for earmarks," Specht said.

But that has left Mesa with one less congressman to fight for additional monies for the district.

Mesa Mayor Keno Hawker said he agrees with Flake's philosophy. However, he believes most congressman are looking to bring home the bacon to their respective districts, and that Flake should play along because the money is going to go somewhere.

"If you're not at the table, then you're the dinner," Hawker said.

### **Breakdown of Rep. Harry Mitchell's earmarks benefiting Mesa**

#### LAW ENFORCEMENT

Tactical Environment Simulator Training Technologies: Virtual reality training program that

simulates real-world situations for police officers. Request: \$650,000 Received: \$200,000

## ENVIRONMENT

Va Shly'ay Akimel Salt River Restoration: Restoration of a 14-mile degraded portion of the Salt River in the vicinity of Mesa and the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community. Request: \$1.6 million Received: Still pending but the appropriations bill has \$800,000 for the project.

## EDUCATION

Enfermeras En Escalera: Program creates fast-track program for internationally-educated nurses who are legal residents or citizens of the United States and seeking to be licensed as registered nurses Request: \$175,000 Received: \$175,000

Making Every Student Accountable: Help expansion of "Making Every Student Accountable Program" into four inner-city schools, reaching approximately 500 at-risk youth. Program offers out-of-school enrichment, mentoring, and positive youth development activities to improve academic performance and reduce dropout rates. Request: \$500,000 Received: \$150,000

Online Registered Nurse Recertification Program: Provides an innovative model for helping both Arizona and U.S. address nursing shortage in cost-effective manner. Request: \$125,000 Received: \$100,000

## RECREATION

Mesa Fiesta Paseo Pathway: Complete design of two-mile pedestrian/bicycle trail, to increase safety and reduce congestion, support economic development, and improve access to job centers in Fiesta District. Request: \$330,000 Received: \$0

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Williams Gateway Airport: Expand runways and taxiways. Request: \$5.715 million Received: \$1.3 million