

Inouye proudly declares he's No

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U.S. Sen. Daniel Inouye, normally not a politician who seeks a lot of attention outside of election years, is proclaiming himself Capitol Hill's king of earmarks.

"It may please you or it may not please you," he told a gathering of business leaders on the Big Island, West Hawaii Today reported. "I'm the No. 1 earmarks guy in the U.S. Congress."

Inouye and his colleagues in the Hawaii congressional delegation have

long defended targeted spending provisions as a prerogative of Congress, to which the Constitution gives the power of the purse. They also contend they can better ascertain what their districts need than executive branch officials.

During remarks Monday to the Kona-Kohala Chamber of Commerce, the 84-year-old senator described his earmarks as transparent and beneficial to the state. He cited the Army's Pohakuloa Training Area on the slope of Mauna Kea, which resulted in significant

upgrades to Saddle Road, once a narrow, unsafe path that connects the east and west sides of the vast island. The senator helped dedicate the newest 6.5-mile section of improved roadway on the day of his speech.

The amount of federal money the eight-term senator has poured into the project could not be determined, but supporters said the improvements could not have been accomplished otherwise.

"It's a huge project for this island and we can't wait to get it completed,"

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said Vivian Landrum, president of the Kona-Kohala chamber.

Federal funding for the road has not received much criticism. But other Inouye earmarks have, such as the \$2 million that he and U.S. Rep. Mazie Hirono, D-Hawaii, secured for the Imiloa Astronomy Center in Hilo.

"Why do we need \$2 million to promote astronomy in Hawaii when unemployment is going up and the stock market is tanking?" Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., said in March.

Inouye sponsored 324

earmarks totaling more than \$2 billion in the 2008 and 2009 appropriations bills, according to the Center for Responsive Politics and Taxpayers for Common Sense, two Washington, D.C. watchdog organizations.

Steve Ellis, vice president of the latter group, lauded Inouye for improving accountability on Senate earmarks, though more reforms are needed. But Ellis cited other comments the senator made about Hawaii projects he wants to finance before he leaves office.