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Republicans repeatedly criticized Biden's infrastructure program. Then they asked for money. | CNN Politics

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Last November, GOP Rep. Tom Emmer of Minnesota released a statement slamming the passage of the infrastructure bill, arguing it “lays the groundwork for passage of President Biden’s multi-trillion-dollar socialist wish list.”

Then in June, Emmer – the House Republican campaign chairman leading attacks on Democrats for supporting the law – quietly submitted a wish of his own.

[In a letter to](#) Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, Emmer expressed his hearty support for a multimillion dollar grant to improve part of Highway 65 in his district. The work was critical, Emmer argued, not just for his constituents, but for people all over Minnesota. Crashes were leading to fatalities. Congestion was leading to huge delays. Plus, Emmer added, “this grant also strives to serve as a social justice measure.”

Emmer’s plea is one of dozens obtained by CNN in response to a public records request, full of instances like Alabama Sen. Tommy

Tuberville modulating his tone from accusing the law of “using fuzzy math and IOU’s to hide the real cost,” [to appealing to Buttigieg](#) because “as a former mayor, you understand better than anyone the time and money that goes into applying for highly competitive grants.

The letter writers include high profile attackers of government spending, as well as several in tight reelection races, such as Florida Rep. María Elvira Salazar and California Rep. David Valadao, who like Emmer, slammed the Biden law in public and then behind the scenes asked for money from it.

Most members have not publicly mentioned the letters they sent petitioning for money from the bill they derided. Many, when contacted by CNN about their requests, either ignored questions or insisted that they were being consistent with their criticisms of the law with the requests they made.

That was the logic Emmer used in a statement provided by his office, criticizing the infrastructure bill for not including a greater proportion of its cost to roads and bridges, but adding, “We’ll always answer the call to advocate for real infrastructure improvements in the Sixth District as a part of smart spending practices.” (It was not among the round of such grants announced last month.)

While some Republican members who opposed the law have already been criticized for praising projects made possible by it, these letters went a step further, going out of their way to argue for even more spending back home.

All typed out on the standard blue and white letterhead for the House and Senate, the letters are full of the graciousness and

politesse of official government correspondence, and make no mention of their votes against the infrastructure law.

None cite “socialism” or “radical spending.” No one included a paragraph about House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy calling the law “rushed and irresponsible,” or Georgia Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene calling the Republicans who voted for it “traitors.” Often, the letters signed by members of the House and Senate appeal using the same terms that they derided Democrats for using, from “economic growth” to “sustainability” benefits.

Arizona Rep. Paul Gosar, a leading Biden critic who explained his vote against what he called a “phony” infrastructure bill by issuing a statement that “this bill only serves to advance the America Last’s socialist agenda, while completely lacking fiscal responsibility,” wrote [three separate letters](#) between March and July advocating for projects in his district. They’d enhance quality of life, Gosar wrote. They’d ease congestion and boost the economy. They’d alleviate bottlenecks and improve rural living conditions.

Gosar’s spokesperson said the congressman was “not obligated to vote for a bill of which he supports 80% of the funding if 20% is horrifically absurd,” but that “once appropriated and authorized, Congressman Gosar is free, and quite willing, to fight for the funding authorized to benefit good projects.”

Kentucky Rep. Andy Barr called the bill a “big government socialist agenda.” He later wrote three letters of his own on behalf of three different projects, also citing their importance for safety and job growth. Barr’s spokesperson said that the congressman couldn’t vote for the full bill because of its overall cost and money he called

“giveaways to the green energy industry,” and that all the grants he supported were for traditional transportation funding programs. Those programs, though, would not have been funded if the infrastructure bill hadn’t passed.

Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul said he voted against the bill because it typified “wasteful spending,” which would deepen the national debt. Paul wrote 10 different letters petitioning for more of that money coming into Kentucky, including for a community development organization working to expand a riverwalk, improve three stretches of roads, to strengthen a dam, support the revitalization of an old Internal Revenue Service facility in Covington, improve streets in Lexington and modernizing a bridge between northern Kentucky and Cincinnati, Ohio [which he argued would](#) “promote continued economic development, ease congestion, improve air quality, and support job growth throughout the region” for what would be “profound national and regional significance.”

“Opposition to a spending bill does not always mean opposition to the goal of that spending; opposition to a spending bill can mean opposition to spending that adds to the deficit and is not offset with spending cuts elsewhere,” argued a Paul spokesperson.

None of the projects that Gosar, Barr or Paul wrote on behalf of have so far been awarded grants, according to the announcements made by the Transportation Department. But of the nine projects Sen. Marsha Blackburn, who last year said the infrastructure bill was full of “frivolous left-wing programs that add to our nation’s debt,” wrote in support of, three were awarded so far, for a total of over \$60 million.

The Transportation Department has left open the possibility that the applications will still be awarded through future grant programs.

In an interview with CNN, Buttigieg said “it’s hard not to chuckle” when seeing the letters from members who voted against the infrastructure law, or by seeing some of these members brag back home about the letters they’ve written – including Colorado Rep. Lauren Boebert, who called the bill “garbage” but then [touted advocating for \\$33 million for a new bridge.](#)

“Obviously, it’s good for their districts, which is why it’s probably good for America,” Buttigieg argued.

Salazar joined several of her Democratic colleagues from the Miami area in signing two letters looking for more money to improve the city’s ports. Both letters were also signed by Republican Rep. Carlos Giménez, who like Salazar, voted against the infrastructure bill.

Valadao wrote in support of grants for five different projects, which he said would provide more economic stability and reduce dangerous emissions. Both voted against the infrastructure law. Both are facing strong Democratic challengers in November.

Valadao declined an interview request, but a spokesperson said there was no conflict between opposing the infrastructure bill and asking for money from the bill for his district, arguing that he was “not trying to get attention for this,” but simply trying to help constituent groups.

“The money is there. That’s the world we’re living in,” the spokesperson, who asked not to be named, told CNN, attributing his vote against the bill to inflation and Democrats who

unsuccessfully tried to link the infrastructure bill to President Joe Biden's broader Build Back Better spending bill (some provisions of which were later included in the Inflation Reduction Act passed in August). "Was it all bad? No. But those were the circumstances at the time."

Some of the money Salazar pushed for has been awarded. None of the grants Valadao wrote on behalf of have been awarded so far.

Iowa Rep. Ashley Hinson, who has already been pilloried by the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee for touting the \$829 million, which went to locks and dams along the Upper Mississippi after saying the infrastructure law was a "socialist spending spree," has been even more active in pushing for other money. Hinson wrote seven letters to the Department of Transportation for grants which in many cases [she called "vital" and "essential"](#) and "have an impact on the day-to-day lives of every single resident in this community."

A spokesperson for Hinson who asked not to be named told CNN, "once funding from the infrastructure bill was already set to be spent, Rep. Hinson advocated for money on the table to come back to Iowa instead of allowing it to go to other states." Of the grants she supported, only one was awarded, \$2.28 million for a new pedestrian overpass in Dubuque.

Rep. Markwayne Mullin, now the GOP nominee for Senate in Oklahoma, said last year that he voted against the infrastructure bill because he thought 90% was wasteful and "I will not support funding for policies that drive our country into socialism." In April, Mullin [wrote to Buttigieg in support of a RAISE grant](#) to improve a

road in a rural area off of Highway 69, which he said would help introduce bicycle lanes, boost jobs and access to goods, and improve overall quality of life. “The RAISE grant funding,” he wrote in another nod to prioritizing climate change measures despite a voting record which has not, “would greatly improve sustainability by reducing emissions and redeveloping an existing infrastructure plan.”

Though the bill [received GOP votes in the Senate](#) and House, many Republicans have not wanted to give Biden credit – while many Democrats have been reluctant to call the bill “bipartisan,” given the intensity of the opposition they faced (Biden and his aides prefer to emphasize that the law was an across the aisle achievement). Republican officials outside of Congress, though, were for the most part incredibly enthusiastic about all the money coming out of Washington to invest in local projects, cheering it on individually or through statements of support via the bipartisan National Governors Association and US Conference of Mayors.

But after gushing about all the benefits of the bill at an event in Washington in January, Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchison said he couldn't explain why neither of his own home state senators or any of his state's four members of the House voted against the bill.

“There's always going to be something objectionable in the bill that maybe I could have written better,” said Hutchison, who was then serving as National Governors Association chair. “We're going to put it to good use.”

Oregon Rep. Pete DeFazio, the chairman of the House Infrastructure Committee and one of the Democratic members deeply involved with the bill, said he wasn't happy to hear about

the request letters.

“They’re hanging on to our coattails while they’re opposing these things. And that should have consequences, in my opinion,” DeFazio told CNN outside the Capitol last month, comparing the letters to Republican members who touted the help small businesses got in their districts from the American Rescue Plan, which received no Republican votes. “But the administration is, unfortunately like the Obama administration, too evenhanded.”

Buttigieg confirmed that he and other officials were following the directives from the President that politics and votes not influence how the money is awarded.

“We’re not going to be trying to be jerks about it,” Buttigieg said. “We’re also not going to be shy about folks knowing who was with us and who was against us.”

But Buttigieg said that not being shy would be limited to appearing with elected officials who supported the infrastructure bill on his frequent touring around the country.

“We’re obviously not going to penalize anybody,” he said, “for the shortsightedness of their politicians.”

Other senators who voted against the infrastructure bill but also wrote letters to the Department of Transportation in support of grants funded by it: South Dakota Sens. Mike Rounds and John Thune, Iowa Sen. Joni Ernst, Mississippi Sen. Cindy Hyde-Smith, Alabama Sen. Richard Shelby, Pennsylvania Sen. Pat Toomey and Oklahoma Sen. Jim Inhofe.

Other House members who also opposed the bill and wrote letters: Iowa Rep. Mariannette Miller-Meeks, Missouri Rep. Vicky Hartzler,

Indiana Rep. Larry Bucshon, Alabama Rep. Jerry Carl, Kentucky Rep. Jim Comer, Florida Rep. John Rutherford, Nevada Rep. Mark Amodei, Rep. John Joyce of Pennsylvania, South Carolina Rep. Nancy Mace, Washington state Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, Minnesota Rep. Michelle Fischbach, Mississippi Rep. Trent Kelly, Iowa Rep. Randy Feenstra, California Rep. Tom McClintock, Arizona Rep. Debbie Lesko, Louisiana Rep. Julia Letlow, and Illinois Rep. Darin LaHood.

CLARIFICATION: This headline and story have been updated to reflect Rep. Tom Emmer's criticism of the infrastructure bill as laying the groundwork for passing what he referred to as "President Biden's multi-trillion dollar socialist wish list."