

Plenty of Pork in Governor's Proposed State Spending Plan

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By Rick Brundrett - The Nerve

His 304 Gov. Henry McMaster's proposed fiscal 2022 state budget, his office in a recent news release contended it "significantly invests in the state's core functions of government" while "maintaining his commitment" to "fiscally responsible practices."

But although emergency spending in response to the coronavirus outbreak in South Carolina likely will continue in the fiscal year that starts July 1, McMaster's proposed nearly \$30.8 billion state budget also contains a number of pricey, questionable items, a review by The Nerve found, including, for example:

- \$19 million for a proposed convention center in downtown Greenville, though a spokesman for the state agency that the money would flow through told The Nerve on Thursday that the agency didn't request the funds. In comparison, the \$19 million is nearly four times the amount that McMaster requested for state veterans nursing homes.
- \$5 million in total rent and moving costs to relocate the state Department of Education's downtown Columbia headquarters, though an agency spokesman told The Nerve on Thursday that no decisions have been made as to where or when the relocation will take place.
- \$2 million in rent costs to relocate the state Department of Natural Resources' headquarters, though the agency's formal budget request didn't identify a relocation site other than to somewhere "outside of the immediate downtown Columbia area." An agency spokesman this morning said no decisions have been made regarding the location or timing of the move.
- \$1.46 million for the recently formed "SC Revolutionary War Sestercentennial (250th anniversary) Commission," including \$595,000 for "Rev. War Site acquisition and development," according to the state Department of Archives and History's formal budget request.

Meanwhile, Rep. Brian White, R-Anderson, who is the former chairman of the budget-writing House Ways and Means Committee, wants to repeal a [longstanding state law](#) – the origins of which date back to 1919 – requiring the House and Senate budget-writing committees to hold joint public hearings on the governor's proposed state spending plan. He filed his [bill](#) last week to repeal the law.

White was removed from the Ways and Means Committee by House speaker Jay Lucas, R-Darlington, several weeks after The Nerve in 2018 [revealed](#) multiple instances of apparent conflicts of interest while he was the longtime committee chairman.

The Nerve repeatedly has [pointed out](#) that lawmakers for years have ignored the budget law. Following the law is part of an [eight-point reform plan](#) published in 2015 by the South Carolina Policy Council, the parent organization of The Nerve.

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The House passes its version of the state budget first; the Senate typically changes it, and differences are worked out in a joint conference committee before a final version is sent to the governor. Both chambers have to agree to override any budget vetoes by the governor.

The total budget includes state, federal and "other" funds, such as fees and fines, college tuition, lottery proceeds, state gasoline taxes, and a portion of the state sales tax earmarked for K-12 education.

The governor submits his budget version before the House and Senate pass their proposed spending plans. In announcing his proposed fiscal 2022 budget earlier this month, McMaster gave a list of big-ticket items, including \$500 million for the state's "rainy day" reserve fund, a \$123 million grant program for small businesses in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak, and \$48 million to expand access to full-day kindergarten to lower-income 4-year-old children.

He also called on lawmakers to "end the practice" of "undisclosed 'pork barrel' earmarks in the budget that are shielded from public view, debate and scrutiny." The Nerve for years has reported on budget [earmarks](#), which typically are funding requests by lawmakers that didn't originate with the state agency that would receive the public dollars.

Two years ago, The Nerve [revealed](#) that Rep. Bruce Bannister, R-Greenville, and then-Rep. Dwight Loftis, R-Greenville, proposed, through a budget earmark, spending \$5 million in state funds for a new convention center in downtown Greenville. Bannister, a member of the House Ways and Means Committee, at the time said the center would house a large art collection that had been displayed at the private Bob Jones University.

The money was designated to flow through the state Arts Commission, though the agency didn't request the funding. Lawmakers eventually decided then to give \$7 million for the project, identified in the 2019-20 state budget as the "Greenville Cultural and Arts Center."

For next fiscal year, McMaster has proposed spending \$19 million more on the project – the total estimated cost of which was about \$320 million as of 2019. Like the 2019 budget earmark, the \$19 million would come out of state surplus funds and would pass through the Arts Commission.

And like the 2019 earmark, the \$19 million was not requested by the Arts Commission in its proposed fiscal 2022 budget, agency spokesman Jason Rapp confirmed Thursday when contacted by The Nerve.

Still, Rapp in his email response said that "we will be happy to follow the Governor's direction to ensure the funds are released to the center should the funding remain in our budget."

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Under state law, the nine members who govern the Arts Commission are appointed by the governor, with consent of the Senate.

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McMaster's office didn't respond to a written request Thursday from The Nerve seeking comment on the convention center project or other proposed budget items highlighted in this story.

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