Alaska's Stevens Put a Hold on Pork-Barrel Transparency Bill

After activist blogs get denials from 97 other senators, his office says his role was no secret.

By Joel Havemann, Times Staff Writer
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WASHINGTON — Ending a mystery that had captivated conservative and liberal Internet activists, Sen. Ted Stevens (R-Alaska) emerged Wednesday as the senator who secretly held up action on a bill to create a searchable online catalog of federal grants and contracts aimed at helping the general public find out who receives government support.

The acknowledgment by Stevens ended an innovative exercise in Internet-based political activism. Several blogs had urged readers to call senators and ask whether they had placed a "hold" on the legislation to create the online database. Many activists believed the catalog would make it easier to root out pork-barrel spending.

As of midday Wednesday, the blogs had been able to obtain denials from 97 senators that they had placed the hold, which under unwritten Senate rules prevented the legislation from moving to a floor vote. With the suspects narrowed to a small group, Stevens' office acknowledged that he had blocked the bill.

The bill was drafted by Sen. Tom Coburn (R-Okla.) in response to public concerns about the size of the federal deficit generally and, more specifically, the tendency of lawmakers to earmark funds in spending bills for favored projects back home.

"Why shouldn't the American people know where their money is being spent?" Coburn asked in defense of his bill. He predicted that lawmakers would approve less spending if voters knew what the spending was for.

Stevens' spokesman, Aaron Saunders, said Stevens merely wanted the bill delayed until he could be convinced that it would not create another unnecessary layer of bureaucracy.

"We explained our position to Sen. Coburn," Saunders said. "From our perspective, it hasn't been a secret hold."

Stevens took advantage of a Senate tradition that allows a member or group of members with concerns about legislation to put a private hold on it by issuing a request — anonymously, if desired.
The petitioners do not have to tell the sponsor of the legislation they are challenging, and the leader keeps the bill from coming to a vote until the concerns are met.

Enter the blogs, with their opposition to pork-barrel congressional spending and their desire for greater government openness.

"We had the perfect irony of a senator's putting a secret hold on legislation designed to guarantee public transparency about pork," said Paul Kiel, a blogger-reporter for the website TPMmuckraker.com.

The first blog to take up the cause of Coburn's bill was Porkbusters.org, which seeks to control federal spending. It said its readers gathered denials from 27 senators that they had placed the hold.

Then readers of TPMmuckraker.com, a site that reports on public corruption, and GOPprogress.com joined the campaign. Kiel, at TPMmuckraker.com, said the three had received satisfactory denials from all but three of the 100 senators.

Saunders said Stevens had not acknowledged his role sooner because he had been traveling during the August congressional recess.

"More important, the senator doesn't pursue his legislative goals through the media," Saunders said. "He didn't think there was a whole lot of value in turning this into a media circus."

Saunders said the hold was not meant as retribution for Coburn's opposition last year to $223 million for a much-derided "bridge to nowhere" in Alaska that Stevens sought to include in a massive highway bill.

The bridge would link the island city of Ketchikan, Alaska, to another island with 50 residents that is also home to the city's airport. The Senate ultimately authorized the $223 million, not for the bridge but for the state to spend as it saw fit. Though the blogs had been urging readers for days to help hunt down the senator who had placed the hold, it emerged Wednesday that Coburn had publicly identified Stevens on Aug. 17 as having placed the hold. That fact was little noticed until TPMmuckraker mentioned it Wednesday morning.

The Times Record, a newspaper in Fort Smith, Ark., had reported that Coburn had discussed the situation at a town hall meeting in Sallisaw, Okla. "He's the only senator blocking it," Coburn was quoted as saying of Stevens.

Hours after the TPMmuckraker report, Stevens' office acknowledged that he was the one.

Time is running out for lawmakers to act on Coburn's bill.

Days before Congress began its August recess, the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee cleared the legislation for action by the full Senate.

But Congress wants to adjourn for the year early in October so that its members can campaign full time for reelection.

Senators still have to devote significant time to must-pass legislation, such as the 12 annual spending bills for the budget year that begins Oct. 1. The Senate has approved only one of those bills.
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