

The Coburn Amendment: An Explanation and Timeline

In early 2009, Congress began debating an \$800+ billion economic recovery package to create or save jobs and strengthen our nation's infrastructure. The House of Representatives produced a bill ([H.R. 1](#)), the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009), which included a provision specifically excluding zoos and aquariums from receiving any funds - directly or indirectly - from the bill. The House bill stated, "*None of the funds appropriated or otherwise made available in this Act may be used for any casino or other gambling establishment, aquarium, zoo, golf course, or swimming pool.*" It passed the House on January 28 by a vote of 244-188 ([Roll call 46](#)).

The original Senate bill, ([S.336](#)) as introduced, did not contain any such restrictive provision. However, several amendments were considered during debate on the bill.

Sen. Tom Coburn (R-OK) announced his intention to offer an amendment to prohibit any funds in the economic stimulus bill from going to museums, zoos, aquariums, and certain other types of projects. The language of the amendment, (Amendment No. 175, as filed) was, "*None of the amounts appropriated or otherwise made available by this Act may be used for any casino or other gambling establishment, aquarium, zoo, golf course, swimming pool, stadium, community park, museum, theater, arts center, or highway beautification project, including renovation, remodeling, construction, salaries, furniture, zero-gravity chairs, big screen televisions, beautification, rotating pastel lights, and dry heat saunas.*" This amendment was not formally offered, and was therefore never voted on.

On Wednesday, February 4, during Senate consideration of the Economic Stimulus bill, Sen. David Vitter (R-LA) offered a complex amendment ([S. Amdt. 179](#)) which included one provision barring funds from being used for zoos, aquariums, or a so-called "Mob Museum" (officially known as the Las Vegas Museum of Organized Crime and Law Enforcement). The amendment stated, "*None of the funds appropriated or otherwise made available in this Act may be used for any casino or other gambling establishment, aquarium, zoo, golf course, swimming pool, or Mob Museum.*" The Vitter amendment also called for the deletion of the proposed \$55 million for the Historic Preservation Fund at the National Park Service, and investments in high-speed rail, hybrid vehicles, climate change research, and health information technology, among other provisions. This amendment was defeated by a 32-65 vote ([Roll call 37](#)).

On February 5, Sen. Tom Coburn offered another amendment to prohibit economic stimulus funds from going to museums, zoos, and aquariums. The amendment (S. Amdt. No. 309) stated, "*None of the amounts appropriated or otherwise made available by this Act may be used for any casino or other gambling establishment, aquariums, zoo, golf course, swimming pool, stadium, community park, museum, theater, art center and highway beautification project.*" On February 6, the U.S. Senate adopted this amendment on a 73-24 vote ([Roll call 51](#)).

Differences between the House and Senate versions of the economic stimulus legislation were resolved in a House-Senate conference committee. The committee included the following Members of Congress: Sen. Daniel Inouye (D-HI), Sen. Max Baucus (D-MT), Sen. Harry Reid (D-NV), Sen. Thad Cochran (R-MS), Sen. Charles Grassley (R-IA), Rep. David Obey (D-WI), Rep. Charlie Rangel (D-NY), Rep. Henry Waxman (D-CA), Rep. Jerry Lewis (R-CA), and Rep. Dave Camp (R-MI).

In reconciling the two pieces of legislation, Congress adopted the following language, "SEC. 1604. None of the funds appropriated or otherwise made available in this Act may be used by any State or local government, or any private entity for any casino or other gambling establishment, aquarium, zoo, golf course, or swimming pool."

On February 17, President Obama signed the bill into law ([Public Law 111-005](#)) at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science. The museum has 465 solar panels on its roof, and was chosen as the event site to highlight the importance of developing alternative energy sources and green jobs.

STATEMENTS BY AAM PRESIDENT FORD W. BELL:

"Museum supporters should be very pleased that we were able to mobilize a massive field-wide effort to prevent a funding ban on museums in this bill. However, the fact that Congress - and specifically the U.S. Senate in its [February 6 vote](#) - initially saw fit to exclude museums from funding shows that we have a lot of work to do in making the case for museums. It is also disheartening that zoos and aquariums will be prohibited from competing for most economic stimulus funds made available through this bill. Zoos and aquariums have tremendous public benefit for environmental education and wildlife conservation, and contribute greatly to our nation's economy by spurring tourism."

"The fact that museums, zoos, and aquariums were targeted in this way illustrates the fact that we need to educate our legislators about how museums serve as economic engines and are a vital part of our nation's educational infrastructure."

"Museums employ more than a half-million Americans, spend an estimated \$14.5 billion annually, and rank among the top three family vacation destinations. Visitors to cultural and heritage destinations stay 53% longer and spend 36% more money than other kinds of tourists. Museums help to anchor neighborhoods and communities, and often serve as the centerpieces of community redevelopment efforts. Museums provide lifelong learning opportunities for Americans of all ages, including after-school programs for at-risk youth. Museums work with school districts to both train educators and help teach the curriculum. Many museums are free to the public and those that have admission fees charge only a small percentage of the actual cost of their programming. Unfortunately, the economic downturn has forced museums to struggle just to maintain essential services."

"Congress clearly needs to be reminded that museums are a vital part of our economy. It's time for us to make our case and I am calling on all museums to send their Members of Congress an Economic Impact Statement showing the ways in which their museum contributes to the economy."

"Passage of this amendment sets a dangerous precedent for the future. Museums are also being hard hit by this economy, laying off workers and cutting back on services. Not allowing museums to even compete for the funds in this bill is wrongheaded and completely disregards the fact that museums play a critical role in our communities as economic engines."

"I have frequently been asked how such an amendment could be offered in the first place. It all started with the U.S. Conference of Mayors releasing a report of 'shovel-ready projects' in their cities and towns. Mayors determined that these projects – a wish list of sorts worth \$19 billion in total – could be implemented right away and get people working right away. Not surprisingly, museums and museum-related projects were frequently mentioned on this list. It is clear that mayors understand that building or renovating a museum will be a critical component to reviving their communities. Mayors understand that museums are economic engines. They understand that their tourism base is often reliant on museums of all kinds. As the Mayors' list circulated, there were a few projects listed that simply were viewed by SOME as non-essential. Even though most of these projects had not been funded – and will never be funded. They were just examples of how cities and towns were ready to put people to work right away, strengthening our nation's educational infrastructure. The fact that mayors look to museums to help revitalize their local economies is actually a good case in favor of museums."