



# PPC Monthly Newsletter

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## The Clock Is Ticking, by Ken Lydecker

In response to one of our recent economic updates and commentaries, a client of ours sent us an email with a link to the following website: [www.USDebtClock.org](http://www.USDebtClock.org). Whether you have or haven't already seen it, we encourage you to visit the site and spend time taking in all of the various pieces of financial data.

The site contains data which is both very interesting and eye-opening in terms of some of the financial issues we face as a country, as people, and as investors. As a start to your inquiry onto the site, here are some of the more interesting pieces of data you will find there:

### **Spending versus Income:**

1. Amount of annual US Federal Government Revenue Collected: \$2,181 Trillion Dollars
2. Amount of annual US Federal Government Spending: \$3,527 Trillion Dollars (Please note that this is approximately 161% of what it collects. Can you run your home or business that way?)

### **What is the \$3,527 Trillion Dollars of annual spending by the government composed of?**

1. \$808 Billion (23%) goes for Medicare and Medicaid
2. \$708 Billion (20%) goes for Social Security
3. \$695 Billion (20%) goes for Defense
4. \$430 Billion (12%) goes for Income Security Programs (unemployment compensation, nutritional programs, and various other programs to help those less fortunate or out of work)
5. \$210 Billion (6%) on just the interest owed on the National Debt
6. \$205 Billion (6%) on pensions for Federal Employees (who are not part of Social Security)
7. \$476 Billion (13%) on 'everything else.'

### **What about 'all government spending' (adding state and municipal spending to the Federal totals)?**

1. The total annual US 'Gross Domestic Product (GDP)' is about \$14.7 Trillion Dollars
2. The total of 'all government' spending is about \$6.8 Trillion Dollars (47% of our GDP)
3. Total of our current National Debt: \$14.3 Trillion Dollars (97% of our annual GDP)
4. Total of the estimated debt of personal debt: \$16.1 Trillion Dollars (112% of GDP) (Note: Of the \$16.1 Trillion, \$13 Trillion (82%) are personal home mortgages)

### **Let's look at the composition of our national workforce:**

1. There are an estimated 150,000,000 potential workers (per recent unemployment data)
2. There are 16,000,000 state and local government employees (11%)
3. There are 4,300,000 Federal employees (3%)
4. Via subtraction, that would leave an estimated 130,000,000 non-government employees (86%)

### **How do our unemployment and 'people in need' statistics look?**

1. The 'official' unemployment number is about 13,400,000 (9% of the estimated workforce)
2. The 'actual' unemployment number is about 24,000,000 (16% of the estimated workforce)
3. An estimated 44,000,000 people collect food stamps every month (30% of the workforce)

We believe this data shows the importance of government and individuals getting their financial house in order.

What data on the site strikes you the most?

## Don't Be Nickeled-and-Dimed by Account Fees

Interest rates on deposit accounts, such as savings accounts, interest-bearing checking accounts, and money market accounts have been persistently low, and rates aren't likely to improve any time soon. To make matters worse, financial institutions are under pressure to raise account fees, as they look to recapture some of the revenue lost in the wake of stricter financial regulations. The result is that some account holders now earn less interest on their money than they pay in account fees.

Though it's hard to find attractive interest rates, it's relatively easy to save on account fees if you're willing to do your homework. Start by reviewing your account statements to determine your spending and saving habits. What average account balance do you generally maintain? Do you pay monthly account maintenance or service fees? How many ATM transactions do you have in a month? Are you overdrawing your account? Once you know your financial habits, you'll be ready to take steps to reduce account fees.

### If you pay account maintenance fees

An account maintenance or service fee is a common monthly service charge that applies to some accounts. Financial institutions offer a variety of products, each with their own fee structure. Often, higher maintenance or service fees may apply to accounts that pay higher interest rates. To help avoid these fees:

- Shop around, and compare your options--not all banks and credit unions charge maintenance fees.
- Make sure you understand and follow account requirements. For example, monthly maintenance fees may be reduced or waived if you sign up for direct deposit or online bill pay, maintain another account, or tie your account to a loan or mortgage.
- Read your account statements and notices you get from your financial institution. Otherwise, months may go by before you notice that fees have gone up or account requirements have changed.
- Reevaluate your needs regularly. They change over time, and you may want to switch your money to another type of account, or even find another bank or credit union that better suits your needs.

### If you frequently use ATMs

Withdrawing money from an ATM is so quick, it's easy to overlook how much it's costing you. Fees for ATM transactions generally range from \$2 to \$5, and may be higher. One way to



**If you encounter a fee you don't agree with, talk to an account representative at your bank or credit union. He or she may be willing to rebate the fee, or suggest alternatives to help you reduce or avoid future charges.**

minimize these fees is to choose a financial institution that owns many local ATMs, but that isn't your only option. To help reduce ATM costs:

- Ask for a list of surcharge-free ATMs. Many financial institutions participate in networks that enable account holders to withdraw cash from designated ATMs without paying a surcharge. You can also download an application to your mobile device to help you find surcharge-free ATMs anywhere in the country.
- Plan your spending. Withdrawing larger amounts when possible (at least enough to last for a week) will substantially reduce the number of ATM transactions you have.
- Look for a bank or credit union that rebates ATM fees imposed by ATMs owned by other financial institutions (limits may apply).
- Opt for cash back when you use your debit card (a minimum or maximum amount may apply). This is often a free or low-cost alternative to going to the ATM.

### If you tend to overdraw your account

Overdrafts are common--a 2009 study by the nonprofit Center for Responsible Lending found that over 50 million Americans overdraw their checking account over a 12-month period. To help reduce or eliminate overdrafts:

- Look into online banking. Being able to track your account history whenever you want can help you avoid overdraft fees. You'll also be able to quickly transfer funds among accounts, should the need arise.
- Sign up to receive transaction or low balance alerts via your mobile device or computer.
- Link your savings account to your checking account so that money will be automatically taken out of your savings account should you overdraw your checking account (typically, little or no fee is charged).

### The bottom line

Often, people choose a bank or credit union based on convenience--the location of branches, easy access to ATMs, and hours of service. Convenience is important, but so is cost. And you don't have to settle--there are plenty of banks and credit unions across the country that offer great products and excellent service, without hitting you too hard in the pocketbook.

## Estate Tax Exemption Is Portable (for Now)

Recent legislation introduced a new, but perhaps temporary, estate planning concept--exemption "portability." In short, the estate of a deceased spouse can transfer to the surviving spouse any portion of the federal estate tax exemption that it does not use. The surviving spouse's estate can then add that amount to the exemption it is entitled to, increasing the total amount that can be passed on to heirs tax free. This new feature makes it easier for married couples to minimize the potential impact of estate taxes.

### The federal estate tax exemption defined

The federal government imposes a tax on the value of your property when you pass it along to your descendants at your death. Any amount that is passed to a surviving spouse is generally fully deductible. The estate is also allowed to exclude a certain amount that passes on to nonspouse beneficiaries. That amount is called the "basic exclusion amount," which is \$5 million in 2011.

### How the exemption works for married couples

Prior to the new tax law, if a spouse died without having planned for his or her exemption, the deceased spouse's estate would have passed tax free to the surviving spouse under the unlimited marital deduction (assuming all assets passed to the surviving spouse), and the deceased spouse's exemption was lost or "wasted." The surviving spouse's estate could then only transfer an amount equal to his or her own exemption free from federal estate tax. To solve this dilemma, married couples typically set up what is commonly referred to as a credit shelter trust (aka "bypass" or family trust) that sheltered or preserved the exemption of the first spouse to die.

The following examples illustrate how portability can achieve a similar result without the use of a credit shelter trust.

### Example: result without portability

Assume Henry and Wilma are married, have all of their assets jointly titled, and have a net worth of \$10 million. Henry dies first, when the federal estate tax exemption is \$5 million and there is no portability. Henry's estate passes to Wilma free from federal estate tax under the unlimited marital deduction and does not use any of his \$5 million exemption. Assume that at the time of Wilma's death, the exemption is still \$5 million, the federal estate tax rate is 35%, and Wilma's estate is still worth \$10 million.

With Henry's exemption completely wasted, Wilma can pass on only \$5 million free from federal estate tax. Assuming no other variables, Wilma's estate will owe about \$1,750,000 in federal estate tax:  $\$10\text{ million estate} - \$5\text{ million exemption} = \$5\text{ million taxable estate} \times 35\% \text{ estate tax rate} = \$1,750,000$ .

### Example: result with portability

Assume Henry and Wilma are married, have all of their assets jointly titled, and have a net worth of \$10 million. Henry dies first, when the federal estate tax exemption is \$5 million and there is portability. As above, Henry's estate passes to Wilma free from federal estate tax under the unlimited marital deduction and does not use any of his \$5 million exemption. Even though Henry's estate owes no tax, Henry's executor files a timely return on which he elects to transfer Henry's unused exemption to Wilma. Assume that at the time of Wilma's subsequent death, the exemption is still \$5 million, the federal estate tax rate is 35%, and Wilma's estate is still worth \$10 million. Since Wilma has "inherited" Henry's unused exemption, she can pass on the entire \$10 million estate free from federal estate tax. Portability of the estate tax exemption saves Henry and Wilma's heirs \$1,750,000 in estate tax.

### Portability does not eliminate the benefits of credit shelter trusts

Even with portability, there are still tax and nontax considerations that may lead you to use a credit shelter trust, such as:

- The portability feature is in effect for only two years and will expire after 2012, unless Congress enacts further legislation.
- The trust can help protect assets against creditors of the surviving spouse or future beneficiaries (typically children and grandchildren).
- The trust allows the first spouse to die to control the ultimate distribution of his or her assets. For example, in a second marriage situation, one spouse may wish to ensure that any assets remaining after his or her spouse's death pass to his or her children from a previous marriage.
- Appreciation of assets placed in the trust will escape estate taxation in the survivor's estate.
- The portability feature applies only to estate tax; it does not apply to the generation-skipping transfer (GST) tax. Without a trust, any unused GST tax exemption of the first spouse to die is lost.



**To use the exemption portability, the first spouse to die must elect to use portability on his or her estate tax return. An estate tax return must be filed by the first spouse to die to use portability even if the return is not otherwise required to be filed.**

**Many states have state estate tax exemptions that are less than the federal estate tax exemption. So, while your surviving spouse might not be subject to federal estate tax upon your passing, your surviving spouse may have to pay significant state estate tax if you rely solely on the federal exemption portability.**



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## Ask the Experts

### Can I make charitable contributions from my IRA?



Yes, if you qualify. The law authorizing "qualified charitable distributions," or QCDs, has recently been extended through 2011.

You simply direct your IRA trustee to make a distribution directly from your IRA (other than a SEP or SIMPLE) to a qualified charity. You must be 70½ or older, and the distribution must be one that would otherwise be taxable to you. You can exclude up to \$100,000 of QCDs from your gross income in 2011. If you file a joint return, your spouse (if 70½ or older) can exclude an additional \$100,000 of QCDs in 2011. But you can't also deduct QCDs as a charitable contribution on your federal income tax return--that would be double dipping.

QCDs count toward satisfying any required minimum distributions (RMDs) that you would otherwise have to take from your IRA in 2011, just as if you had received an actual distribution from the plan. However, distributions that you actually receive from your IRA (including RMDs) that you subsequently transfer to a charity cannot qualify as QCDs.

For example, assume that your RMD for 2011

is \$25,000. In June 2011, you make a \$15,000 QCD to Qualified Charity A. You exclude the \$15,000 of QCDs from your 2011 gross income. Your \$15,000 QCD satisfies \$15,000 of your \$25,000 RMD. You'll need to withdraw another \$10,000 (or make an additional QCD) by December 31, 2011, to avoid a penalty.

You could instead take a distribution from your IRA and then donate the proceeds to a charity yourself, but this would be a bit more cumbersome, and possibly more expensive. You'd include the distribution in gross income and then take a corresponding income tax deduction for the charitable contribution. But the additional tax from the distribution may be more than the charitable deduction, due to IRS limits. QCDs avoid all this by providing an exclusion from income for the amount paid directly from your IRA to the charity--you don't report the IRS distribution in your gross income, and you don't take a deduction for the QCD. The exclusion from gross income for QCDs also provides a tax-effective way for taxpayers who don't itemize deductions to make charitable contributions.

### Can I name a charity as beneficiary of my IRA?



Yes, you can name a charity as beneficiary of your IRA, but be sure to understand the advantages and disadvantages.

Generally, if you name a spouse, child, or other individual as beneficiary of a traditional IRA, they must pay federal income tax on any distribution they receive from the IRA after your death. By contrast, if you name a charity as beneficiary, the charity will not have to pay any income tax on distributions from the IRA after your death (provided that the charity qualifies as a tax-exempt charitable organization under federal law), a significant tax advantage.

After your death, distributions of your assets to a charity generally qualify for an estate tax charitable deduction. In other words, if a charity is your sole IRA beneficiary, the full value of your IRA will be deducted from your taxable estate for purposes of determining the federal estate tax (if any) that is due. This can also be a significant advantage if you expect the value of your taxable estate to be at or above the federal exclusion amount (\$5 million for 2011).

Of course, there are also nontax implications. If you name a charity as sole beneficiary of your IRA, when you die your family members and other loved ones will obviously not receive any benefit from those IRA assets. If you would like to leave some of your assets to your loved ones and some assets to charity, consider leaving your taxable retirement funds to charity and other assets to your loved ones. This may offer the most tax-efficient solution, since the charity will not have to pay any tax on the retirement funds. If the retirement funds are a major portion of your assets, you might consider leaving those funds to a charitable remainder trust. Under this type of trust, the trust receives the funds free from income tax at your death, then pays a lifetime income to individuals of your choice. When those individuals die, the remaining trust assets pass to the charity. Finally, another option is to name the charity and one or more individuals as co-beneficiaries.

The issues discussed here are complex. Be sure to consult an estate planning attorney for further guidance.