



# PPC Newsletter

## Preferred Planning Concepts, LLC

Dominic Cimino  
Ken Lydecker  
Dave Nicholson  
2800 S. River Road, Suite 240  
Des Plaines, IL 60018  
T: 847.375.0505  
F: 847.375.1480  
therese@ppcplanning.com  
www.PPCPlanning.com

**All of us at PPC wish you and your family a joyful holiday season, and a healthy and prosperous New Year!**

**- Ken, Dave, Dominic, Julie, Therese, Maja, Holly and Denise**

## December 2011

Why Does Europe Affect Your Portfolio?

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 Preferred Planning Concepts, LLC

Comprehensive Financial Services  
for Individuals, Professionals and Businesses

## Why Does Europe Affect Your Portfolio?

When a possible default on Greek sovereign debt becomes headline news, a lot of people find themselves wondering, "How can the problems of a country so small and so far away create such turmoil in the world's financial markets?" What's happening in Europe is probably affecting your portfolio right now, regardless of the quality of your holdings or how well diversified you are.

### Bank exposure

One of the chief concerns about the possibility of default on sovereign debt has to do with the financial stability of banks that hold it. For example, some of the largest French banks have already seen their credit ratings downgraded because of their extensive holdings of debt from troubled European countries. If a Greek default made banks reluctant to lend to one another, that could affect credit markets worldwide.

American banks hold very little Greek debt compared to European banks; however, they could face a different challenge. Derivatives known as credit default swaps can create a ripple effect, multiplying a default's impact beyond the bondholders to other financial institutions and institutional investors. U.S. financial institutions are major issuers of credit default swaps, and the potential impact that a Greek default would have is unclear. However, since the 2008 financial crisis, banks have been forced to hold greater capital reserves to deal with contingencies.

### Potential for tighter credit creating recession

Lending worldwide hasn't fully recovered from the last financial crisis, and has helped keep global economic recovery sluggish. If banks' lending ability were impaired further by a financial crisis brought on by a default on sovereign debt, pessimists argue that a slowing global economy could be thrown into recession. Europe represents a major market for many U.S. companies, and a recession there would be felt around the globe.

### Greece could be the tip of the iceberg

Even though Greece is the immediate concern,

Europe's larger economies could pose a bigger threat. Italy and Spain both face debt and deficit problems. Italy's economy is more than five times that of Greece; Spain's is more than four times bigger (CIA World Factbook 2011). If a Greek default would have a ripple effect, default by Spain or Italy could create waves.

To compound the problem, borrowing costs for troubled countries have risen. At recent auctions, nervous investors have demanded higher interest rates to compensate them for their higher perceived risk. As any credit card holder knows, having to pay a higher interest rate makes paying off debt and balancing the budget more difficult.

### All politics is local

Recently there have been signs that voters in stronger European countries, such as Germany, may be questioning why they should continue to support others when their own economies are slowing. Also, investors worry that the financial support available from the European Financial Stability Fund (EFSF) may not be sufficient or available quickly enough to avert problems. Though there's no shortage of suggestions for how to deal with the situation--issuance of euro bonds backed by all eurozone members, leveraging the EFSF's existing assets, greater fiscal integration among countries, Greece abandoning the euro--questions about the ability and willingness of other eurozone countries to support weaker members have contributed to investor anxiety.

Financial markets hate uncertainty, and the situation has contributed to the recent volatility across a variety of asset classes. However, eurozone leaders have the benefit of having watched the United States during the 2008 crisis. Also, they have generally reaffirmed their determination to defend the euro.

Uncertainty about Europe could persist for months, so while it's important to monitor the situation, don't let every twist and turn derail a carefully constructed investment game plan. To determine how market events might affect your own portfolio, don't hesitate to ask questions and get expert help.



***The one-size-fits-all fill-in-the-blank forms that do-it-yourself estate planning sources provide may be attractive to some individuals because they cost a fraction of what attorneys typically charge. But is saving a few dollars worth the risk and potentially high cost of doing things incorrectly?***



## The Problem with Do-It-Yourself Estate Planning

As the number of Internet websites and software packages have quickly multiplied, along with the many books and stationery store kits that have always been available, do-it-yourself (DIY) estate planning is on the rise. The one-size-fits-all fill-in-the-blank forms that these sources provide may be attractive to some individuals because they cost a fraction of what attorneys typically charge. But is saving a few dollars worth the risk and potentially high cost of doing things incorrectly?

### **Cheap, easy, and better than nothing?**

Proponents of DIY estate planning typically have two arguments:

1. It's cheap and easy: A will, for instance, can be completed online in about 15 minutes for about \$69. In comparison, working with an experienced attorney to create common estate planning documents (wills, trusts, health-care directives, and powers of attorney) may cost you anywhere from \$800 to \$3,000 or more, depending on the complexity of your estate.
2. It's better than nothing: The consequences of dying without estate planning documents are that the state will make important decisions for you, such as how your property will be distributed, who will care for your minor children, and what medical care you'll receive if you are unable to make your wishes known.

These points are valid; for those who cannot afford to pay an attorney, DIY may be the only economical alternative available. For others, a poorly drafted will is better than no will at all, especially where the naming of a guardian for minor children is involved. But the chances that DIY estate planning will effectively accomplish exactly what you intend is slim. Here's why.

### **It's too easy to make mistakes**

DIY sources typically only handle simple estates, and can't deal with even the most common complexities such as children from a prior marriage, children with special needs, property that has appreciated in value resulting in capital gains, or estates that are large enough to be subject to estate taxes. And, DIY sources generally fail altogether to take advantage of sophisticated estate planning strategies because they typically can't account for an individual's unique circumstances.

Further, you may make an error by failing to understand the instructions or by following the instructions incorrectly.

The result is that the documents you create could be invalid, ineffective, or contain legal language having consequences you never intended. You might not know if that is the case during your lifetime, but at your death your loved ones will find out and may suffer the lasting consequences of your mistakes.

### **You're not getting legal advice**

DIY sources provide forms but not legal advice. In fact, these sources clearly state that they are not a substitute for an attorney, and that they are prohibited from providing any kind of legal advice.

Estate planning involves a lot more than producing documents. It's impossible to know, without a legal education and years of experience, what the right legal solution is to your particular situation and what planning opportunities are available. The actual documents produced are simply tools to put into effect a plan that should be specifically tailored to your circumstances and goals.

### **Estate planning laws change**

Laws are not static. They constantly change because of new case law and legislation, especially when it comes to estate taxes. Attorneys keep up with these changes. DIY websites, makers of software, and other sources may not do as good a job at keeping current and up-to-date.

### **Fixing mistakes can be costly**

As previously stated, estate planning documents can be obtained from a lawyer for \$800 to \$3,000 or more, depending on the complexity of your estate. But these costs are minor in comparison to the costs that your loved ones may incur if there are serious errors in your DIY estate planning. Many more thousands of dollars may have to be spent by your loved ones to undo what was done wrong.

### **The bottom line**

There are obvious savings in legal fees by using form wills and trusts, but there are also risks involved. One of them is that problems such as defective forms, violations of state law, or improper witnessing will not be apparent to you when the documents are signed. It may be only after death occurs many years later when the problems are discovered, and at that point it may be very costly, or even worse, too late to revise the documents.

## How Much Do You Know about Social Security?



For more information, visit the Social Security website at [www.socialsecurity.gov](http://www.socialsecurity.gov) or call 800-772-1213.



Social Security is in the news more and more, as the first wave of baby boomers retire and economic pressures on the program increase. More than 90% of Americans are covered by Social Security,\* but how much do you know about this important program?

### How is Social Security funded?

Unlike many government programs, Social Security is funded primarily through the collection of payroll taxes. In 2010, 81.9% of funding came from this source, with the rest derived from interest earned on government bonds held by Social Security trust funds and income taxes paid on benefits.\* That's why Social Security is known as a "pay-as-you-go" system. However, someone working and paying Social Security taxes today is not funding his or her own benefits, but is funding the benefits of someone who is receiving them now or in the near future--one of the reasons why Social Security is facing a potential funding shortfall. According to the Social Security Administration (SSA), the number of retired workers will double in less than 30 years, but there will be fewer workers paying into the system. And with life expectancies increasing, benefits will be paid for a longer period.\*

### How are earnings reported to the SSA?

If you work for an employer, your employer will send a copy of your W-2 form annually to the SSA. If you're self-employed, the IRS will report your earnings to the SSA annually after your federal income tax return has been processed.

### What benefits are available?

Although Social Security is known as a retirement program, benefits are paid to people of all ages, including surviving family members and disabled individuals. In 2010, 5.7 million people were awarded Social Security benefits. Of those, 46% were retired workers, 36% were survivors or spouses/children of retired or disabled workers, and 18% were disabled workers.\*

### How do you qualify for benefits?

As you work and pay payroll taxes, you earn Social Security credits. Generally, you need to work 10 years to earn enough credits to qualify for retirement benefits--other benefits have different requirements. Contact the SSA if you have any questions about your benefit entitlement.

### Do most people apply for early retirement benefits?

Yes. According to a report by the Government Accounting Office (GAO), 43% of people take

early retirement benefits at age 62, while almost 73% of people apply for benefits before they reach full retirement age.\*\*

### How much more will you receive if you delay applying for benefits?

For each year past your full retirement age you delay receiving benefits, your Social Security benefit will increase by a certain percentage (8% for anyone who was born in 1943 or later). For example, if your full retirement age is 66 and you delay receiving benefits until age 70, your annual benefit will be 32% higher.

### Can you receive benefits based on an ex-spouse's record?

You may qualify for divorced spousal benefits if you were married for at least 10 years, you haven't remarried, you are age 62 or older, and you don't qualify for a higher benefit based on your own work record.

### Do workers with lower earnings receive more from Social Security?

A worker who has lower earnings will receive a lower monthly benefit than someone with higher earnings because benefits are based on average lifetime earnings (the highest 35 years of earnings are used in the calculation). However, the Social Security benefit formula is designed to ensure that workers with lower earnings receive a greater percentage of their preretirement earnings. For example, a worker with relatively low earnings may receive a benefit that is approximately 55% of his or her preretirement earnings, while a worker with relatively high earnings may receive a benefit that is approximately 25% of his or her earnings.\*\*\*

### Do you have to stop working to receive Social Security retirement benefits?

No. As long as you've reached early retirement age and meet eligibility requirements, you can apply for Social Security benefits even if you decide to continue working. However, if you're younger than full retirement age and earn more than a certain amount, your benefits will be temporarily reduced (once you reach full retirement age, your benefits will be increased to account for the money that was withheld).

**\*Source:** *Fast Facts & Figures About Social Security, 2011*

**\*\*Source:** *GAO-11-400, Retirement Income, June 2011, based on data compiled by the SSA Office of the Chief Actuary*

**\*\*\*Source:** *SSA Publication No. 05-10045, 2011*

## Ask the Experts

### Preferred Planning Concepts, LLC

Dominic Cimino  
Ken Lydecker  
Dave Nicholson  
2800 S. River Road, Suite 240  
Des Plaines, IL 60018  
T: 847.375.0505  
F: 847.375.1480  
therese@ppcplanning.com  
www.PPCPlanning.com

For more information, contact Preferred Planning Concepts at (847) 375-0505.

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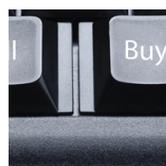
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### Will my broker calculate my cost basis for DRP stocks?

If you think you don't need to track cost basis on your own because brokers must now report to both you and the IRS the cost basis for any stock sold, there are some potential pitfalls to be aware of.

First, new cost basis reporting requirements are being phased in. New regulations requiring brokers to report cost basis generally apply only to stocks bought after January 1, 2011. (Mutual funds will become subject to the same provisions in 2012; bonds and options will follow in 2013.) However, for a stock bought as part of a dividend reinvestment plan, or DRP, the new provisions will apply only to purchases made on or after January 1, 2012. As a result, for most DRP stock purchased before that date, in most cases you or your tax preparer will still be responsible for calculating accurate cost basis information.\*

Because DRPs typically involve many purchases over a long time, calculating the cost basis for a DRP stock could be challenging. Fortunately, there's also a provision that makes the calculation easier. For stocks held in DRPs, the cost basis of all purchases in the plan can

be averaged to determine the cost basis for individual shares sold.

The ability to average sales from a DRP applies only to plans whose documents specify that at least 10% of every dividend paid must be reinvested in identical stock. To be considered identical, the stock must have the same CUSIP number, which would not apply to purchases of the same stock made outside the DRP.

Even after adjusted cost basis reporting is available for DRP stocks, you can still specify which shares are considered the ones sold for tax purposes. However, you must do so before the trade settles--typically, three days after the transaction.

You can include any transaction costs paid as part of your adjusted cost basis. And even though your adjusted cost basis may be calculated by someone else, it may still be a good idea to keep documentation of any purchases or sales to make sure it matches the information being supplied to the IRS.

**\*Note:** The reporting regulations already apply for DRPs that do not require reinvestment of at least 10% of every dividend paid.



### Are there exceptions to new cost basis reporting rules?

New provisions that went into effect in 2011, requiring brokers to track and report adjusted cost basis for stocks, have special provisions that apply in certain situations.

**Wash sales:** A wash sale occurs when a substantially identical security is purchased within 30 days before or after the security it replaces is sold; when that happens, any losses resulting from the sale are not immediately deductible for tax purposes. The new regulations still require taxpayers to comply with the IRS regulations governing wash sales. However, brokers are required to adjust the cost basis of a wash sale only if the newly acquired securities are identical to the securities sold (meaning the securities involved share the same CUSIP identification number).

Brokers also are not required to report adjusted cost basis for wash sales when the purchase and sale transactions occur in different accounts. However, taxpayers are still responsible for accurately reporting the proceeds of any wash sale transactions, regardless of whether the purchase and sale are made in the same account.

**Short sales:** In the past, the IRS required brokers to report a short sale for the year in which the short position was opened; however, the proceeds of a short sale generally were taxed in the year in which it was closed. The new regulations correct that discrepancy. In addition to requiring brokers to track cost basis, the new regulations mandate that the cost basis of a short sale will now be reported in the year in which the short is closed. For example, if you initiated a short position in July 2011 that was closed two months later, the cost basis should appear on the 1099-B form for 2011 that brokers must submit to the IRS in early 2012. However, if the position has not been closed before January 1, 2012, the cost basis will be reported to the IRS only after the position is closed. If you close the position after January 1, 2012, it would appear on the 1099-B due in early 2013.

Even though brokers must now supply additional information about the net proceeds of a stock sale, it's worth remembering that the individual taxpayer is still responsible for accurately reporting information to the IRS.