



Family First Financial Planning

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Summer is here and it is the time to slow down and take well deserved vacations! Speaking of such, Leslie is gone on her annual camping trip and added a side trip to CT/NY. In her absence feel free to contact Jackie who can help you with any planning need or questions that can't wait. Leslie will check emails but it will be once a day or so while in the tent so no promises of quick replies.

Speaking of slowing down, don't get lulled into the wrong investment by chasing a higher yield to replace the extremely low yields on CD's and bank accounts. Remember high yield equals higher risk so please check with us first before you invest if it sounds too good to be true!

Happy Travels!

Leslie T. Corcoran, CFP and Jackie Goldstick, CFP

In this issue:

Will You See Higher Tax Rates in 2011?

Returning to Work After You've Retired

Stock Dividends: An Income Alternative

How have stocks performed after a recession?

Will You See Higher Tax Rates in 2011?



The year was 2001. The top marginal federal income tax bracket was 39.6%, and the tax rate that applied to most long-term capital gains was 20%. Then came the Economic Growth and Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2001, followed two years later by the Jobs and Growth Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2003. By mid-2003, the top marginal tax rate was 35%, and the 20% capital gains rate had dropped to 15%. But this tax relief was designed to be temporary--the provisions that established lower rates were crafted to self-expire after a period of time. And now, in 2010, we're only months away from seeing those provisions expire.

Federal income tax brackets

Right now, there are six marginal income tax brackets: 10%, 15%, 25%, 28%, 33%, and 35%. For 2010, these brackets apply to married couples filing joint federal income tax returns in the following manner:

2010 Marginal Income Tax Brackets	
Married Filing Jointly	
Taxable Income	Marginal Tax Rate
Not over \$16,750	10%
Over \$16,750 to \$68,000	15%
Over \$68,000 to \$137,300	25%
Over \$137,300 to \$209,250	28%
Over \$209,250 to \$373,650	33%
Over \$373,650	35%

As it stands now, these marginal tax brackets will expire at the end of 2010. There would be no 10% bracket for 2011, and the remaining bracket rates would return to their original 2001 levels: 15%, 28%, 31%, 36%, and 39.6%.

Long-term capital gain tax rates

For 2010, if you sell shares of stock that you've held for more than a year, any gain is long-term capital gain, generally taxed at a maximum rate

of 15%. If you're in the 10% or the 15% marginal income tax bracket, however, you'll pay no federal tax on the long-term gain (a 0% tax rate applies). That means if you're a married couple filing a joint federal income tax return, and your taxable income is \$68,000 or less, you'd pay no federal tax on the gain.

However, these rates are also scheduled to expire at the end of 2010. Absent new legislation, in 2011, a 20% rate will generally apply to long-term capital gains. Individuals in the 15% tax bracket (remember, there won't be a 10% bracket in 2011) will pay the tax at a rate of 10%. Special rules (and slightly lower rates) will apply for qualifying property held for five years or more.

Finally, while qualifying dividends are taxed in 2010 using the same capital gain tax rates described above (i.e., 15% and 0%), in 2011 they'll be taxed as ordinary income.

Will Congress take action?

In the proposed 2011 budget submitted to Congress in February, President Obama asked for a permanent extension of the current 10%, 15%, and 25% marginal income tax brackets, and an expansion of the current 28% tax bracket. The current 33% and 35% brackets would be allowed to expire, resulting in the top two marginal rates for 2011 returning to 36% and 39.6%. The expanded 28% bracket would be calculated in a way that would allow individuals earning less than \$200,000 (less the standard deduction amount and one exemption) and married couples filing jointly earning less than \$250,000 (less the standard deduction and two personal exemptions) to escape taxation at the top rates.

The President also proposed making the current tax rates that apply to long-term capital gain (i.e., the 0% and 15% rates) permanent, but adding a new 20% rate for those in the newly reestablished 36% and 39.6% brackets.

Will Congress act, or will it simply let current rates expire? There's plenty of time before 2011, so stay tuned ...



Returning to Work After You've Retired

No matter how much you've looked forward to retirement, you might find yourself missing the social interaction and financial benefits you enjoyed when you were employed. Perhaps getting a full- or part-time job will enable you to rely less on your retirement savings, leaving more to potentially grow for the future. Or maybe you're looking forward to pursuing your dream of owning a business. Whether working during retirement is a choice--or a necessity--make sure you understand the financial implications.



According to the U.S. Department of Labor, 29% of Americans age 65 to 69 are currently employed.

Finding the right work opportunity

Many people spend 20 years or more in retirement, so it's important to do something you love. If you don't quite know what that is, or you aren't ready to commit to a permanent position, you might try working in a contract job, or signing up with a temporary employment agency that will allow you to work when, and where, you wish. Some agencies even offer health and retirement benefits. If it's been a while since you searched for work, get in touch with a local career counselor to get tips on preparing a job application or resume, and to learn more about the jobs available in your community.

To help you determine your salary requirements and how many hours you'll work, spend some time reviewing your retirement plan, focusing on your retirement income needs. Then limit your job search to businesses that offer the right combination of pay, benefits, and working environment.

Working for yourself

Once you retire, you may finally be ready to turn your ideas and talents into a business. Mature entrepreneurs often have the time and experience necessary to become successful business owners. However, make sure you have enough capital to start up and run your business--it may take longer than you think for your business to become profitable. And don't jeopardize your retirement security by relying on your credit cards, life savings, and home equity to finance your business.

Will working affect your Social Security benefits?

If you're receiving Social Security retirement benefits and you're younger than your full retirement age (65 to 67), your benefits will be reduced if you earn more than a certain amount. In 2010, \$1 in benefits will be withheld

for every \$2 you earn over the annual earnings limit of \$14,160. A higher earnings limit applies in the year you reach full retirement age. If you earn more than this limit (\$37,680 in 2010), \$1 in benefits will be withheld for every \$3 you earn over that amount, until the month you reach full retirement age--then you'll get your full benefit every month thereafter, no matter how much you earn. (But note that even if your benefits are withheld, that reduction isn't permanent. Your benefit will be increased at full retirement age to account for the amount withheld because of your earlier earnings.)

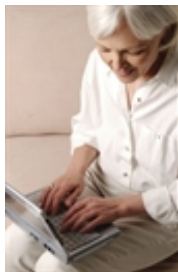
Not all income reduces your Social Security benefit. In general, Social Security only takes into account wages you've earned as an employee, net earnings from self-employment, and other types of work-related income, such as bonuses, commissions, and fees. Pensions, annuities, IRA payments, and investment income won't reduce your benefit.

Also, keep in mind that working may enable you to put off receiving your Social Security benefit until a later date. In general, the later you begin receiving benefit payments, the greater your benefit will be. Whether delaying the start of Social Security benefits is the right decision for you depends on your personal circumstances.

What about income taxes? In general, your Social Security benefit won't be subject to income tax if that's the only income you receive during the year. But if you work during retirement (or you receive any other taxable income, or tax-exempt interest), a portion of your benefit may become taxable. IRS Publication 915 has a worksheet that can help you determine if any part of your Social Security benefit is subject to income tax.

Will working affect your pension?

Unless you plan to return to work with your former employer, your pension benefit won't be affected--you can work, receive a salary from your new employer, and also receive your pension benefit from your former employer. However, if you are considering taking another job--even part-time--with your former employer, check with your plan administrator. Some plans require that your pension benefit be suspended if you retire and then return to work for the same employer.



Stock Dividends: An Income Alternative



Since 2003, when the top federal income tax rate on qualified dividends was reduced, dividends have acquired

renewed respect. When (or if) that tax rate increases (under current law, dividends will once again be taxed as ordinary income in 2011), the long-term demand for high-quality, reliable dividends will likely increase as baby boomers approach retirement and focus on income-producing investments.

Why consider dividends?

Because they can add to a stock's total return, dividends can be especially important if the market produces relatively low or mediocre returns. According to Standard and Poor's, dividend income has represented roughly one-third of the total return on the S&P 500 since 1926, though that percentage has declined over the last decade. Dividends also may mitigate the impact of a volatile market by at least partly offsetting price fluctuations to even out a portfolio's overall return.

Many experts also look at dividends as a relatively reliable indicator of a company's financial health. Investors have become more conscious in recent years of the value of dependable data as a basis for investment decisions, and dividend payments aren't easily restated. Because dividends are one sign of a company's financial health, boards of directors generally are reluctant to send investors a negative message by cutting dividends.

Also, many dividend-paying stocks represent large established companies that may have significant resources to weather economic hard times, which could be helpful if you're relying on those dividends to help pay living expenses.

Finally, dividends become even more valuable if they're reinvested rather than used to supply income. A dividend that's used to purchase more of the company's stock means you'll receive a proportionally greater share of the company's earnings the next time dividends are paid, which in turn means a larger dividend payment to be reinvested (assuming the company continues to do well and the dividend rate remains the same).

Look before you leap

Investing in dividend-paying stocks isn't as simple as just picking the highest yield. If you're investing for income, consider whether the company's cash flow can sustain its dividend. Dividends on common stock are paid at the discretion of the company's board of directors, and there's no guarantee they won't be cut.

Also, some companies choose to use corporate profits to buy back company shares. That may increase the value of existing shares, but it sometimes takes the place of instituting or raising dividends.

If you're interested in a dividend-focused investing style, look for terms such as "equity income," "dividend income," or "growth and income." Also, some exchange-traded funds (ETFs) track an index that's comprised of dividend-paying stocks, or that's based on dividend yield. Be sure to check the prospectus for information about expenses, fees, and potential risks, and consider them carefully before you invest.

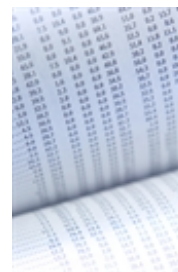
All dividends are not alike

Some dividends, such as those paid by real estate investment trusts (REITs) and master limited partnerships, don't qualify for the same maximum federal income tax rate as qualified dividends, and a portion may be taxed as ordinary income. Also, the 15% maximum rate is scheduled to expire at the end of 2010, and there is no guarantee dividends will continue to receive favorable tax treatment.

The 15% rate applies to qualified dividends (those paid by a U.S. or qualified foreign corporation). Also, you must have held the stock for more than 60 days during a 121-day period (60 days before and 61 days after the stock's ex-dividend date). Form 1099-DIV, which reports your annual dividend and interest income for tax accounting purposes, will indicate whether a dividend is qualified or not.

Be aware that some so-called dividends actually are considered interest for tax purposes. These include dividends from deposits or share accounts at cooperative banks, credit unions, federal savings and loan associations, and mutual savings banks.

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Ask the Experts



How have stocks performed after a recession?

Mark Twain said it best: "History doesn't repeat itself; at best it sometimes rhymes." Past performance is no guarantee of future results, and history can be

an uncertain guide in terms of what might happen with stocks this time around as the economy begins to stagger out of a recession.

That said, it's fascinating to look at how various subsegments of the stock market have behaved relative to one another. Particularly interesting is the comparison between the performance of small-cap stocks and that of large caps after each of the last six recessions. In each case, small caps led the way out of those downturns. During the 12 months after the recession came to an end, as declared by the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), small caps beat large caps every time.

The average difference over the six recovery periods was 14.5%. In some cases, the difference was dramatic; in others, small caps were barely ahead. Here are the percentages by which small caps beat the S&P 500*:

- December 1970-November 1971: 1.3%
- April 1975-March 1976: 23.2%
- August 1980-July 1981: 28.4%
- December 1982-November 1983: 14.4%
- April 1991-March 1992: 14.8%
- December 2002-November 2003: 5.2%

Will history rhyme this time? It's hard to say. Many economists feel the current recession ended sometime in summer 2009. Small-cap stocks have certainly done well since then, but some experts feel large caps are best equipped to navigate a credit crisis. However, until the NBER retroactively declares an official end to this recession, there's no way to know for sure. And don't forget that small caps historically have involved greater risk from market fluctuation, so a double-dip downturn could hit them hardest.

*Percentages calculated based on data from Ibbotson SBBI *Market Results for Stocks, Bonds, Bills, and Inflation* for small company stocks and the S&P 500 Composite Index.



How long does it take a bear market to end?

A bear market, typically defined as an overall stock market decline of at least 20% over an extended period, historically has lasted an average of a little

over a year.* On average, bull markets tend to last almost twice as long as bear markets, but sometimes the differences can be even more dramatic. For example, the bear market that began in January of 2002 lasted almost nine months; it was followed by a five-year bull market from October 2002 to October 2007.

The shortest bear market on record lasted only about six weeks, from mid-July 1998 to the end of August. The longest? October 1939 through April 1942 (almost 30 months), beating out April 1930 to June 1932 (just over two years).

However, defining bear markets and subsequent recoveries from them isn't as straightforward as it might seem. For one thing, a long-term bear market can be interrupted by one or more shorter-term bull markets (or vice versa). For example, was the period between March 2000 and October 2002 a single

30-month bear market with a roughly 3-month "bear market rally" from September 2001 to the beginning of 2002, as some market technicians argue? Or was it two independent bear markets--one from March 2000 to September 2001 and a second from January 2002 to October 2002--that were separated by the shortest bull market since the Depression summer of 1932?

By definition, you only know you're in either a bear or bull market in retrospect, once the market has moved consistently in one direction or another. And the past isn't necessarily a good predictor of what will happen in the future. Since investing is about the future rather than the past, it may make sense to focus more on factors such as asset allocation than on the timing of a recovery you can't control.

*All time frames based on data from the *Stock Trader's Almanac 2010* on the Standard & Poor's 500, a market-cap weighted index composed of the common stocks of 500 leading companies in leading industries of the U.S. economy.