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EYE ON MONEY

MAY
JUN
2021

How to Make the Most of Your 401(k)

plus HOW TO PREPARE FINANCIALLY FOR A NATURAL DISASTER

WASHINGTON EXTENDS EXPIRING TAX BREAKS

A FINANCIAL TO-DO LIST FOR NEWLYWEDS

FINANCIAL

Financial Tasks You Can Tackle In Under 30 Minutes Each

1 Adjust your bill due dates. If you find it a hassle to keep track of multiple bill due dates scattered throughout the month, talk to your billers. Some of them may be willing to adjust your due date so that it aligns with your other bills or when you receive your income.

2 Look for missing money. If you've ever forgotten to cash a check or lost track of an old bank account, your state may be holding the funds for you. You can find out by doing a quick online search of your state's unclaimed property database. There is no fee to search for or claim your funds as long as you use the official state program. Links to the states' search tools can be found at Unclaimed.org and MissingMoney.com. ■

inside

A FINANCIAL TO-DO LIST FOR NEWLYWEDS

These tasks are designed to help you get your finances in order, save money, and build a strong financial future together.

UPDATE YOUR CONTACT INFORMATION

Let the Social Security Administration and your employer know if your name changes.
Not only will this help ensure that you receive the correct benefits in retirement, it can help you avoid problems filing your tax return because the name on your tax return must match the Social Security Administration's records. Please visit www.ssa.gov for directions on how to update your name.

If your name or address changes, update your contact information with your employers.
Be sure to update your information with your former employers also if you have a retirement plan or a pension with them.

If your name or address changes, update your contact information for:
Your financial accounts, credit cards, driver's license and vehicle registration, insurance policies, memberships, passports, and property titles.

REVIEW YOUR INSURANCE

Review your homeowners, renters, and car insurance.
You may have more stuff—furniture, electronics, housewares, and so on—now that you are married. To make certain that your combined belongings are adequately insured, it's a good idea to review the personal property coverage on your homeowners or renters insurance policy. You may also want to explore whether you can lower your premiums by insuring all of your vehicles and your home with the same insurance company.

Review your health insurance.
You generally have a short window of time after your wedding to enroll in a new health insurance plan or to add your spouse to your existing plan. (Check with the health plan for the deadline.) Miss that window and you'll likely have to wait until the next open enrollment period to make any changes to your coverage.

PLAN FOR THE FUTURE

Meet with your financial professional to create or update your financial plan.
Your financial professional can help you and your spouse create a plan for pursuing your shared financial goals, such as a new home, college educations for the children, and retirement.

Consider updating your estate planning documents, such as your will, trusts, and health care proxy, to include your spouse. If you don't have a will or a health care proxy, now is a good time to create them.

Consider updating your beneficiary designations on your retirement accounts, bank accounts, investment accounts, and life insurance policies.

Consider purchasing life insurance if one spouse would struggle financially without the other spouse's income. ■

PLEASE CONSULT YOUR FINANCIAL PROFESSIONAL FOR SPECIFIC ADVICE.

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4 Things to Know About Investing Internationally

Investing in both U.S. and foreign markets can be a smart move for many investors. Here are four things to know about adding international investments to your portfolio.

Investing internationally can help diversify your portfolio.
Because U.S. and foreign markets perform differently at times, adding foreign investments to a portfolio of U.S. investments may help reduce the portfolio's volatility. For example, if U.S. stocks are down, stocks in another part of the world may be performing better, helping to lessen the impact of the declining U.S. stocks on your portfolio's overall return.

Investing internationally offers the potential for growth.
Investing in companies outside of our borders offers you the opportunity to participate in markets that may be growing faster than U.S. markets.

Mutual funds and ETFs are a convenient way to invest internationally.
International mutual funds may hold hundreds or even thousands of foreign securities, making it possible for you to gain broad exposure to international markets with just a few mutual funds.

There are a wide variety of international mutual funds available. Some include securities from many parts of the world while others narrow their focus to one area of the world or to emerging markets, such as China, India, and Brazil.

You can also invest internationally with exchange-traded funds (ETFs) that track the performance of foreign market indexes.

Investing in individual foreign companies is also generally an option.
Many foreign-based companies trade on U.S. exchanges. But instead of shares of stock being traded, it is typically American Depository Receipts (ADRs). Each ADR represents ownership of a specific number of shares in a foreign company. The benefits of ADRs are that they are quoted and traded in U.S. dollars, dividends are paid in U.S. dollars, and shareholder communications are in English. ■

PLEASE CONSULT YOUR FINANCIAL PROFESSIONAL FOR INVESTMENT ADVICE.

Please note: Diversification does not ensure a profit or protect against loss in declining markets. Before investing in mutual funds or ETFs, investors should consider a fund's investment objectives, risks, charges, and expenses. Contact your financial professional for a prospectus containing this information. Please read it carefully before investing. Foreign investments involve special risks due to currency fluctuations, economic and political factors, government regulations, differences in accounting standards, and other factors. Investing in emerging markets involves greater risk than investing in more established markets.

Test Your Knowledge of 529 Plans

529 education savings plans are a tax-smart way to save for college and other levels of education. Here's an opportunity to see how much you know about these popular plans. Please consult your financial professional for advice if you would like to help your child or other loved one save for their education.

1 TRUE OR FALSE: You can open a 529 account for anyone.
True. You can open an account for anyone—your child, grandchild, other relative, friend, yourself—even if someone else has already opened an account for that beneficiary.

2 TRUE OR FALSE: You must choose your state's 529 plan.
False. You can choose nearly any state's 529 plan. However, your state's plan may offer perks for state residents so it is a good idea to consider it along with other plans.

3 TRUE OR FALSE: Investment earnings grow tax-free and withdrawals for qualified education expenses are free from federal taxes.
True. That's what makes 529 plans so attractive. Investment earnings grow free from taxes and withdrawals for qualified education expenses, such as college tuition, are free from federal taxes and perhaps state taxes also.

4 TRUE OR FALSE: You can use 529 savings for grades K-12 tuition.
True. Up to $10,000 per year can be withdrawn free from federal taxes for grades K-12 tuition. State taxes[1] may apply in some states. Check first.

5 TRUE OR FALSE: You can use 529 savings to repay student loans.
True. You can withdraw up to $10,000 each for the beneficiary and his or her siblings to repay their qualified student loans. Although the withdrawals will be free from federal taxes, state taxes[1] may apply in some states. Check first. ■

***PLEASE NOTE:** All investing involves risk, including the possible loss of the amount you invest. For more complete information about a 529 education savings plan, including investment objectives, risks, fees, and expenses associated with it, please carefully read the issuer's official statement before investing. It can be obtained from your financial professional. Some states offer state residents additional benefits, such as a state tax deduction for contributions to the plan, reduced or waived program fees, matching grants, and scholarships to state colleges. Any state-based benefit offered with respect to a particular 529 education savings plan should be one of many appropriately weighted factors to be considered in making an investment decision. You should consult with your financial, tax, or other professional to learn more about how state-based benefits (including any limitations) would apply to your specific circumstances. You also may wish to contact your home state or any other 529 education savings plan to learn more about the features, benefits, and limitations of that state's 529 education savings plan.*

1. Withdrawals for grades K-12, student loan repayments, and apprenticeships may be subject to state tax and the recapture of related state tax benefits in some states.

How to Make the Most of Your 401(k)

How well you manage your 401(k) in your working years can have a big impact on your financial security in retirement. The following tips are designed to help you make the most of your 401(k), from the time you sign up for the plan until the time you retire. The tips are general in nature so please seek specific advice from your financial professional.

Choose a contribution rate that is right for you.

To make it as easy as possible for employees to begin saving for retirement, many employers automatically enroll new employees in their 401(k) plans and assign them a default contribution rate, such as 5% of their wages.

And while it may be convenient to simply accept the default contribution rate, it is important to keep these two things in mind. First, the default contribution rate is merely a general suggestion. You can choose the percentage of your salary that you want to contribute. (You can even opt out of contributing altogether.) Second, the default rate may be much lower than what you need.

So what percentage of your paycheck should you be saving in your 401(k)? The answer will be different for everyone, but for many people the percentage will be closer to 10% or 15% than to 5%. The percentage that is right for you will depend on many factors, such as your age, the amount you've saved so far, and the other financial resources (e.g., pensions) that may be available to you in retirement. It will also depend on how much you can afford to contribute and still meet your other expenses.

One thing to consider when choosing a contribution rate is the company match. Many employers will match the amount you contribute, up to a certain percentage of your salary. Some employers may match your contributions dollar-for-dollar while others may match a portion of what you contribute, such as $.50 for every dollar you contribute up to the match limit. For example, your employer may contribute $.50 for every dollar you contribute up to 6% of your pay. So if you make $100,000 and contribute $6,000 of it per year, your employer will contribute $3,000 each year to your account. If you don't contribute anything, you will miss out on the company match. To avoid missing out on what is essentially free money, it's generally a good idea to contribute at least enough to receive the full company match.

But like the default contribution rate, contributing just enough to get the full company match may not be enough to get you where you want to be in retirement. For people who can afford it, maxing out their 401(k) contributions may be the way to go. Maxing out simply means contributing enough income to reach the annual contribution limit set by the IRS. The maximum 401(k) contribution for 2021 is $19,500. If you are age 50 or older, you may be able to contribute up to an additional $6,500 if your 401(k) plan allows catch-up contributions. These limits are subject to cost-of-living adjustments and generally increase every year or two. You may want to increase the amount you save whenever the limit increases.

If maxing out your 401(k) contributions is not realistic at this point in your life, consider contributing what you can afford now and then increasing your contribution rate over time until you are contributing the maximum.

Consider sticking around until you are vested.

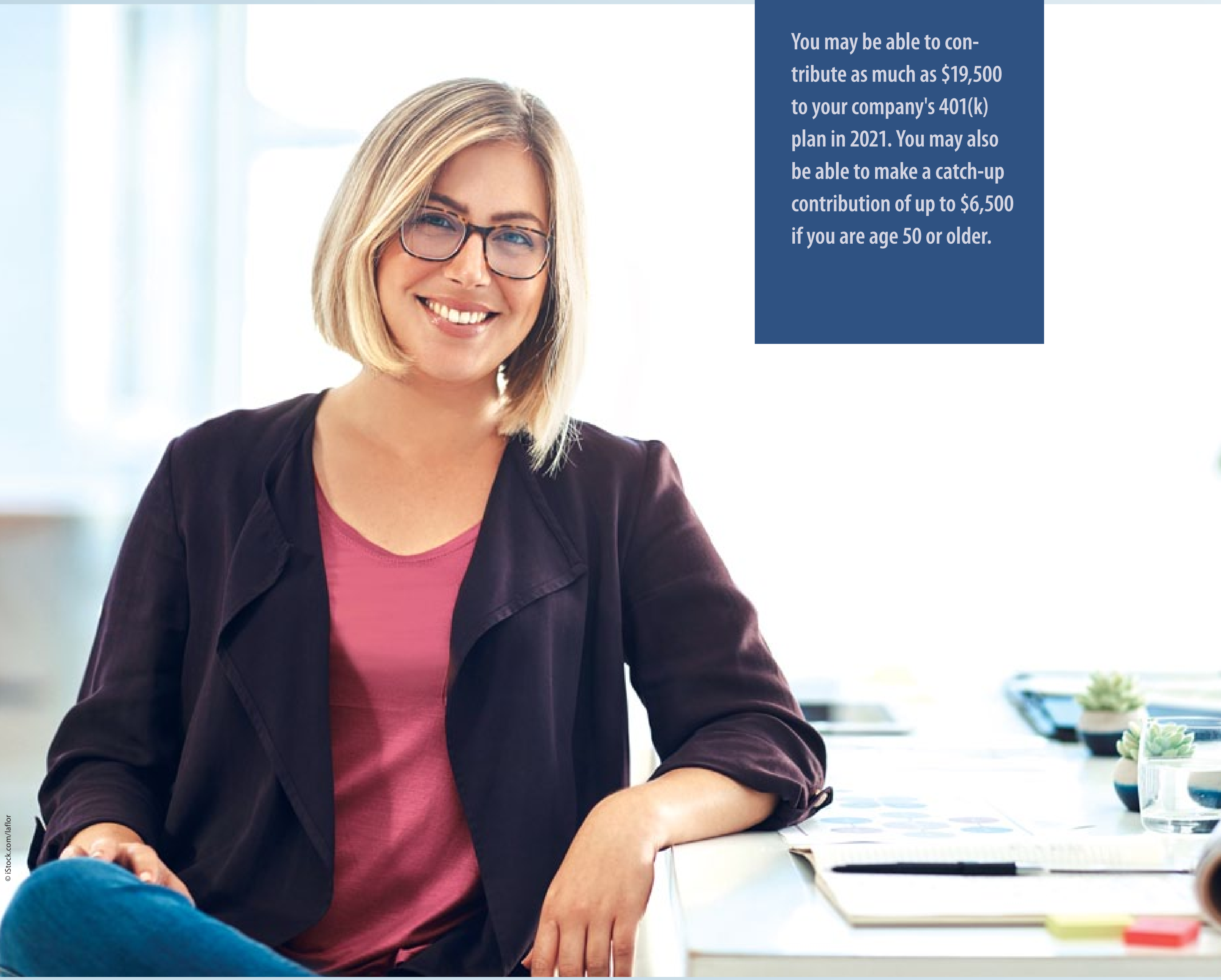
To help make the most of any company matching contributions you receive, it's important to understand your 401(k) plan's vesting schedule. The schedule will tell you when you become the owner of the matching contributions in your account. Depending on your plan's schedule, you may need to work a few years before the matching contributions are yours to keep. (Contributions that you make to your account are always yours to keep.)

Vesting schedules differ from plan to plan, but they are generally structured in one of the following ways.

Immediate vesting. If your plan offers this type of vesting, all of the matching contributions made to your account are yours immediately.

Cliff vesting. With this type of vesting schedule, you must work a few years before you will own any of the company matching contributions in your account. For example, let's say your plan's vesting schedule indicates that you will be 0% vested after year one, 0% vested after year two, and 100% vested after year three. If you leave the company before you've worked there for three years, you will generally forfeit all of the matching contributions that were made to your account. But if you wait until you've completed three years of service with the company before you leave, the matching contributions—100% of them—belong to you.

You may be able to contribute as much as $19,500 to your company's 401(k) plan in 2021. You may also be able to make a catch-up contribution of up to $6,500 if you are age 50 or older.



Over time, differences in performance among stocks, bonds, and cash will cause your account to stray from the asset allocation you chose. Restoring it to your target allocation can help manage risk and keep your investment plan on track.

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Graded vesting. If your plan has this type of vesting schedule, you will gradually gain ownership of the matching contributions over time. For example, the schedule may indicate that you are 0% vested after year one, 20% after year two, 40% after year three, 60% after year four, 80% after year five, and 100% after year six. So if you leave the company after, let's say, four years of service, you are entitled to 60% of the matching contributions in your account. The other 40% is forfeited.

In certain situations, you may become 100% vested sooner than indicated in a cliff or graded vesting schedule. For example, employees generally become 100% vested when they reach the plan's normal retirement age.

To learn when the company matching contributions become yours to keep, please review your 401(k) plan's Summary Plan Description.

Consider contributing to a Roth 401(k). Does your employer's 401(k) plan offer a Roth option in addition to traditional 401(k) accounts? If it does, it is a good idea to consider which approach to saving may benefit you more.

With a traditional 401(k) account, your contributions are made with pretax dollars and withdrawals are subject to income tax. This approach provides an immediate tax benefit because your contributions reduce your taxable income for the year, which in turn reduces your current income taxes. For example, if you contribute $10,000 of your pay this year, you do not have to pay income tax on that $10,000 this year. Instead, income tax is deferred on your contributions and investment earnings until you withdraw them from your 401(k) account.

Some 401(k) plans also offer a Roth option, in which contributions are made with after-tax dollars (income that has already been taxed) and qualified withdrawals are tax-free. (Qualified withdrawals are generally those made after age 59½ and after the Roth account has been open for at least five years.) Although Roth accounts do not offer an upfront tax break, tax-free withdrawals in retirement may be more desirable in some situations.

Roth accounts tend to benefit people who will be taxed at a higher rate in retirement than they are now because it allows them to pay the tax on their contributions now when their tax rates may be lower.

A Roth account may also be a good choice if you are simply looking for some income-tax-free income for retirement or to pass on to your heirs.

Another thing to know about Roth 401(k) accounts is that, unlike Roth IRAs, Roth 401(k) accounts do not have income limits. This means that even high-income individuals can contribute to Roth 401(k) accounts, as well as to traditional 401(k) accounts.

Spread your money around.

Remember the old adage to not put all of your eggs in one basket? It applies to investing also.

To help lessen the impact of a fall in any one company, industry, or part of the world on your overall 401(k) account, it's a good idea to spread your money across a wide range of investments.

401(k) plans typically offer a selection of mutual funds that hold many stocks and bonds, making it possible for you to diversify your account with perhaps just a few well-chosen mutual funds.

Choose an appropriate asset allocation. How you divide your 401(k) account among stocks, bonds, and cash can have a big impact on your final account balance. That's because each asset category has a different potential for reward and a different level of risk.

Generally speaking, the higher the potential return, the higher the risk. Of the three major asset categories, stocks have historically provided the highest returns over the long term and have the most risk. Bonds tend to provide lower returns than stocks over the long term and are generally less risky. And cash investments tend to have the lowest returns and risk.

So how should you divide your investments among stocks, bonds, and cash? The proportions that are right for you will typically depend on how much time remains before you will need your money, your tolerance for risk, and the amount you need to save for retirement. Your objective should generally be to choose a mix of assets that offers you a good probability of reaching your goal, within your time frame and at a level of risk that is acceptable to you.

Here are a few general guidelines to consider.

The longer you have until retirement, the more stocks you may want to hold. Why is that? Stocks generally offer greater growth potential over the long term than bonds or cash. And although stock prices tend to move up and down more dramatically, investors with many years to go before retirement may have time to ride out stock market downturns and benefit from stocks' long-term growth potential.

As you draw closer to the time when you will need your money, you may want to reduce the risk level in your 401(k) account by gradually shifting to more conservative investments, such as bonds and cash investments.

Please note that asset allocation and diversification do not ensure a profit or guarantee against loss in declining markets. Past performance is no guarantee of future results.

If you withdraw money from your 401(k) before age 59½, a 10 percent early withdrawal tax penalty will generally apply to the withdrawal unless you meet an exception to the penalty.

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Don't dip into your 401(k) savings when you change jobs.

Although you have the right to withdraw money from your 401(k) account when you leave a company, it is usually not a good idea to dip into your retirement savings before retirement.

You'll have to pay ordinary income tax on the taxable portion of your withdrawal, which may be all of it, and perhaps a 10% early withdrawal tax penalty if you are under age 59½. Plus, you risk falling short of your retirement savings goal if you use your 401(k) savings for things other than retirement.

Consider choosing one of the other options—leaving your money where it is, transferring it to your new employer's retirement plan, or transferring it to an IRA. Each of these options avoids immediate taxation and makes it possible for your savings to continue to grow tax-deferred or tax-free, which can help keep your retirement savings on track.

Arrange for a direct rollover if you move your 401(k) savings.

If you decide to move your money to your new employer's retirement plan or an IRA when you leave your job, it's generally wise to arrange for a direct rollover. This is usually done with an electronic transfer between the two institutions or with a check made payable to the receiving plan or IRA.

If you have the check made payable to you with the thought that you'll deposit it yourself, there will be tax consequences that most people would prefer to avoid. In a nutshell, your old plan is required to withhold 20% of your rollover distribution for federal income tax. If you do not deposit the entire distribution (including the amount that was withheld) within 60 days, any previously untaxed amount that is not deposited will be subject to income tax and perhaps the 10% early withdrawal tax penalty if you are under age 59½. You can avoid all of this by choosing a direct rollover instead.

Avoid early withdrawals penalties if you retire early.

If you plan to retire and tap your 401(k) account before age 59½, it's a good idea to find out if you qualify for one of the exceptions to the 10% early withdrawal tax penalty that generally applies to withdrawals made before age 59½.

There are several exceptions to the penalty, but two in particular may come in handy if you are retiring. The first of those exceptions states that if you leave your job in or after the year you reach age 55 (age 50 if you are a qualified public safety employee), withdrawals that you make from that employer's 401(k) plan after you leave are penalty-free.

The second exception states that the money you withdraw as part of a series of substantially equal periodic payments avoids the 10% penalty.

There are other exceptions also, including exceptions for people with total and permanent disabilities and those with a certain amount of unreimbursed medical expenses.

If you retire early, avoiding the 10% penalty can help you make the most of your 401(k) savings. ■

Please note: All investing involves risk, including the possible loss of principal.

Before investing in mutual funds, investors should consider a fund's investment objectives, risks, charges, and expenses. Please read the fund's prospectus carefully before investing.

When you leave an employer, carefully consider all of the options available to you regarding the assets you have in the employer's retirement plan. Your options may include leaving your assets in your former employer's plan, rolling them over to an IRA or your new employer's plan, or withdrawing cash. Consider each option's investment options, services, fees and expenses, withdrawal options, potential withdrawal penalties, required minimum distributions, tax treatment of employer stock, legal and creditor protections, and tax treatment.

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Please consult your financial professional.

How well you manage your 401(k) in your working years can have a big impact on your financial security in retirement. Please seek advice from your financial professional regarding how to save for retirement and make the most of your 401(k).

Washington Extends Expiring Tax Breaks

Late in 2020, Washington extended many temporary tax provisions as part of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021. A few of the extensions that may affect your personal income taxes are summarized here. Please consult your tax professional for more details and advice regarding the extended tax provisions.

CHARITABLE CONTRIBUTIONS

The suspension of the AGI limit on cash contributions is extended through 2021.

If you itemize deductions, the maximum amount you can deduct per year for cash contributions to charity is normally limited to 60% of your adjusted gross income (AGI).

In March 2020, the CARES Act temporarily suspended the limit for cash contributions made in 2020, making it possible for taxpayers to deduct qualified contributions of up to 100% of their AGI in a single year. This was done to encourage individuals to support their favorite charities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Consolidated Appropriations Act extends the suspension of the limit to include cash contributions made in 2021.

CHARITABLE CONTRIBUTIONS

The charitable deduction for taxpayers who claim the standard deduction is extended through 2021.

Taxpayers who claim the standard deduction can deduct up to $300 ($600 if married filing jointly) of the cash contributions they make in 2021.

Normally, only those taxpayers who itemize deductions can deduct their charitable contributions. The CARES Act changed that for 2020 by allowing taxpayers who claim the standard deduction to deduct up to $300 of the cash contributions they made in 2020.

The Consolidated Appropriations Act extends this tax provision through 2021 and increases the maximum amount that married taxpayers who file jointly can deduct in 2021 to $600.

The two charitable contribution provisions do not apply to contributions to donor-advised funds and supporting organizations.

ENERGY EFFICIENCY

The tax credit for adding energy-efficient windows, doors, insulation, and more is extended through 2021.

The Nonbusiness Energy Property Tax Credit had been set to expire at the end of 2020, but the Consolidated Appropriations Act extends it through 2021.

This credit has a lifetime limit of $500 (no more than $200 for windows) and can be claimed for adding windows, doors, insulation, roofs, water heaters, and heating and cooling systems that meet certain energy standards to your existing main home.

ENERGY EFFICIENCY

The tax credit for adding alternative energy equipment to your home is extended through 2023.

The Residential Energy Efficient Property Credit, which had been set to expire at the end of 2021, is now extended through 2023.

This provision allows you to claim a tax credit for part of the cost of adding qualified solar, geothermal, wind, and fuel cell equipment to your existing home or your new home that is being constructed.

And beginning in 2021, the list of expenditures eligible for this credit is expanded to include qualified biomass fuel property.

 FR2021-0204-0216/E

MEDICAL EXPENSES

The floor for the medical and dental expense deduction is permanently set at 7.5% of AGI.

This may be welcome news for taxpayers with sizable medical and dental expenses because it allows them to deduct unreimbursed medical and dental expenses that exceed 7.5% of their AGI. For example, if your AGI is $100,000, you can generally deduct the qualified expenses that you pay out of your own pocket in excess of $7,500.

The AGI floor had been set to return to 10% in 2021 before the Consolidated Appropriations Act set it permanently at 7.5%.

Please keep in mind that medical and dental expenses can only be deducted if you itemize deductions. ■

Please consult your tax professional regarding these and other extended tax breaks.

6 Ways to Prepare Financially for a Natural Disaster

If a hurricane, flood, wildfire, or other natural disaster were to strike your area today, would you be ready for it financially? The following tips can help you get your insurance coverage and financial records in order so that you are better prepared to weather the storm financially. For advice about insuring your home and personal property, please consult your insurance agent.

1 Review your insurance coverage regularly.

To help ensure that your homeowners or renters insurance stays in sync with changes to your home and personal belongings, it's a good idea to review your policy with your insurance agent annually, especially if you've recently renovated your home, made a major purchase, or begun using your home for business.

As part of the review, be sure to consider what your current policy may not cover. For instance, homeowners insurance generally does not cover flooding. If you want that type of coverage, you'll need a policy specifically for flooding.

Flood insurance is available through the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) if your community participates in the program and can be purchased from an insurance agent.

The maximum NFIP coverage on a personal residence is $250,000 for the building and $100,000 for the contents. If it would cost more than $250,000 to rebuild your home, you may want to supplement your NFIP coverage with excess flood insurance from a private insurance company.

2 Create a home inventory.

You'll be glad you did if you ever need to file an insurance claim or substantiate your losses for a tax deduction.

Your home inventory should include basic information about your personal belongings, such as the brand, model, and serial number. Add to it the sales receipts and appraisals for your high-value items, such as furniture, appliances, and art.

Shooting a video or taking photos of every room, as well as the interiors of drawers, cupboards, and closets, can help substantiate your insurance claims and jog your memory if you ever need to list the possessions you lost.

If inventorying your stuff sounds overwhelming, consider using a home inventory app to help you document and digitally store a record of your personal belongings.

Once your home inventory is complete, keep a copy of it offsite in a secure location, such as in cloud storage, in a safe deposit box at the bank, or with a trusted family member who lives in a different area.

It is also important to update your home inventory occasionally, such as when you purchase or discard things with high values.

3 Protect your important records.

To prevent your important records from being destroyed if your home is ever damaged, you may want to store your original paper documents in a safe location other than your home. For example, a safe deposit box at a bank can be a good location for deeds, titles, birth and marriage certificates, divorce decrees, contracts, and copies of the documents you have stored elsewhere.

Your attorney may be able to store your will and trust documents for you. Your safe deposit box may not be a good location for the originals of your will and trust documents if you live in a state that seals safe deposit boxes after the account owner's death.

4 Pack a financial go bag.

If a natural disaster is bearing down on your area, there may not be time to gather the documents and information you may need in the coming days. Having a financial go bag already packed or stored digitally in the cloud can help ensure that you'll have your documents and information if you need them.

If your home is damaged or destroyed, you will likely need documents that verify your identity, such as your driver's license, passport, Social Security card, or birth certificate, as well as identification for the other members of your household.

You may also need proof of ownership, such as deeds, rental agreements, and vehicle titles, as well as copies of your insurance policies.

Many of these documents can be scanned or photographed and then stored digitally in the cloud or on a USB flash drive that you take with you.

You may also need the contact information for your insurance companies, banks, credit card companies, mortgage lenders, and your financial and legal professionals. Consider adding them to the contact list on your mobile phone or to a written list that you include in your go bag.

You may want to add some cash to your go bag that you can use for your immediate travel and living expenses in case ATMs and credit card terminals are not working.

And if you stored your home inventory on a USB flash drive, toss the drive into your bag also.

For a more complete list of the documents and information that you may need in the days following a disaster, please see FEMA's Emergency Financial First Aid Kit, which can be downloaded from www.ready.gov/financial-preparedness.

5 Use direct deposit for your income. If you receive income via paper checks, consider setting up direct deposit so that your income can continue to flow in even when mail cannot be delivered to your home due to a natural disaster.

6 Pump up your emergency fund. Having some cash that you can draw on in an emergency may help you avoid racking up credit card debt after a disaster, particularly if you are out of work for a while. You may want to keep your emergency fund in an easily accessible account, such as a savings account, that you can access by ATM or use to fund your checking account for online bill payments. ■

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BEYOND FLANDERS FIELDS | Flanders, Belgium

BY BRIAN JOHNSTON

Beyond battlefields and Bruges, the Flanders region of Belgium offers a series of under-the-radar towns that combine history with energetic contemporary life.

IT'S HARD TO KNOW WHERE TO LOOK in Ghent. Your eyes will dart, your neck will swivel, and you'll have trouble deciding which building is best. Some admire the Flute Player House, named for its medallion of a flautist beneath its eaves. Others appreciate the House of the Free Boatmen, whose decoration celebrates the workers who once powered the medieval port. Gilded ships sail across the roofs of baroque buildings, and Renaissance houses are an elegant contrast to fortified Gothic neighbors.

Individual buildings can almost be overlooked among the riches. Graslei and Korenlei are entire riverside quays lined with medieval guild houses that display four centuries of architectural styles. Whole compact districts such as Patershol are crammed with the former houses of workers and craftspeople now transformed into chic bars, petite restaurants, and gentrified homes with lace curtains and flowerboxes. Favorite view? Perhaps the one from St Michael's Bridge onto an entire ensemble of gables, towers, and church spires.

Ghent emerged in the Middle Ages as a great textile manufacturing center. Its old town seems scarcely changed since. Stroll the nearly entirely pedestrianized streets and you'll sense the energy and can-do optimism that once blossomed when Ghent was the New York or Shanghai of its day, and northern Europe's second-largest city after Paris. It had grand architecture, a prestigious university, and a distinctive Flemish style of art that would become famous.

What you won't find are eye-popping palaces, triumphal arches, or grand avenues, but rather a more downsized collection of civic buildings, guildhalls, and merchant houses. Ghent was a comfortable trading town whose emergent middle class was proud of its independence and republicanism. This is a city that gives you a refreshing glimpse into the lives of ordinary people, rather than kings and aristocrats. The most striking buildings in Ghent are the colossal town hall, which

LEFT: **Medieval guild houses line the riverside quay in Ghent.**
BELOW: **A number of guild houses also surround Antwerp's main square (Grote Markt) and its Brabo Fountain.**

was started in 1518 but took four centuries to complete, and the impressive Cloth Hall and its belfry, striking symbols of the wealth that once flowed through the city.

Even nicer is that Ghent's history isn't preserved like an open-air museum but is infused with plenty of thriving contemporary life. People still go about their business in the old town, and Ghent remains both an important industrial and university city. It has a vibrant food scene, great shopping, and Belgium's best nightlife. In short, you can balance sightseeing with absorbing Ghent's up-to-date local flavor, in a city where history is still being made.

Ghent is a nice reminder, on the European tourist trail, of the ordinary folk whose cumulative efforts—in spite of the monarchs we always read about—created the world we know today. In Flanders you'll also be reminded of the sacrifices of ordinary people if you visit its World War One battlefields. Cemeteries and museums such as the Flanders Field American Cemetery and Memorial tell the story of those who fought and died here, rather than recount the strategies of generals and empires.

What's even more remarkable in this corner of Belgium is that Ghent is only one of many cities in Flanders that share the same fabulous history. The best known is Bruges, which has a famously scenic, mostly medieval old town that straddles several moats and canals, paddled by swans and lined in summer by flowerboxes bursting with geraniums and petunias. Other cities are, however, scarcely visited by tourists, allowing you both to plunge into history in peace and to get a much better experience of their local energy as well.

Mechelen is surely the most charming. This handsome historic town, which preserves three hundred listed monuments, is centered on the Grote Markt or main market square, anchored at one end by a Gothic-fantasy town hall, and always lively with townsfolk sitting at outdoor tables enjoying a sun-soaked beer or two. Don't miss the fantastic clamber up St Rumbold's Tower above the cathedral, which allows you to get right among the bells to have a behind-the-scenes glimpse of medieval architecture and its huge supporting beams.

Almost anywhere you stroll in Mechelen provides an encounter with urban loveliness, from a church hung with Rubens paintings or an archbishop's palace to promenade-lined canals where students busk and gossip. If such a wonderful city were in Italy it would be overcrowded and overpriced, but in Belgium it simply goes overlooked, and the chatter in the breweries and oyster restaurants is mostly in Flemish. Hard to believe Mechelen is just a seven-minute train ride from Brussels airport, and thirty minutes from Brussels itself.

Leuven is another great Flemish town that nobody has ever heard of. Well, nobody but 50,000 Belgian university students, at least. This is Flanders' oldest university town, so no surprise it combines plenty of lopsided architecture with cheap eats and an energetic nightlife. Leuven has no big-name sights, so this is a great place to get away from Europe's endless round of castles and cathedrals and enjoy busy streets and more modest architecture instead. Leuven's town hall, a medieval gem of statuary and draped geraniums, is perhaps the most sumptuous on the continent. The university library looks like a set from a Harry Potter movie. Market stalls sell great rounds of bread and dozens of cheeses, and nobody seems to be in much of a hurry. Leuven is a city for strolling.

It's also Belgium's beer capital. Leuven's cobbled streets are lined with beerhalls and bars. Oude Markt square alone has 42 of them, whose outdoor terraces are the meeting point for everyone. Beer is one of the great pleasures of Flanders. You can visit the enormous Stella Artois factory just outside town—the famous brand was first produced in Leuven in 1366. Belgian beers are high in alcohol, so served in small glasses, each with their own particular shape depending on the brand. The Belgians know their beers, choosing them to suit the season, the food, or special occasions such as festivals and weddings. With over 240 breweries in the country, you can browse your way through anything from amber-colored ale or bitter unfiltered pilsner to dark, sweet specialty beers that taste like Christmas cake in a glass.

Make your final stop at Antwerp. It was once a leading center of trade and art and still has a fine old town, encased in a grittier modern industrial city. There's no better place on a summer's evening, when Antwerp's streets hum with the energy of a thousand restaurants, bars, beer cafés, and dance clubs, all wedged into Gothic and Renaissance facades that are pin-cushioned with fluttering flags. It's another of those happy Flanders finds. It's another place you've scarcely heard about, though after you've been you wonder why it isn't better known. And while you're there, you don't have to tick off some dreaded high-culture bucket list. You can simply sit in a square with a beer, and feel happy to be there. ■

FYI

Road Trip—Everyone in the Car!

Some roads are just special, offering breathtaking vistas that far exceed what one sees on everyday drives. The following roadways are examples of such roads. To find one in your area, check the National Highway Administration's listing of America's best byways at www.fhwa.dot.gov/byways.

ARIZONA

Sky Island Scenic Byway | *www.fhwa.dot.gov/byways*

This national scenic byway offers the opportunity to experience multiple seasons in one 27-mile drive as you ascend approximately 5000 feet from the warm desert northeast of Tucson to the cool forested slopes of Mount Lemmon. Also known as the Mount Lemmon Highway, the Catalina Highway, and the General Hitchcock Highway, this route has lots of twists and turns with several overlooks and picnic areas from which to enjoy the views. If your interest lies more in celestial skies, you may want to check in advance to see whether the University of Arizona's Mount Lemmon SkyCenter has resumed its SkyNights Stargazing Programs.

CALIFORNIA

Big Sur Coast Highway | *www.fhwa.dot.gov/byways*

A 72-mile stretch of Route 1 in the Big Sur area is designated an All-American Road, the Federal Highway Administration's designation reserved for roads that are destinations unto themselves. This stretch of road hugs the California coast and offers stunning views of the Pacific Ocean from the seaside cliffs that the roadway traverses. Travelers may want to pull off occasionally to snap pics of Instagram-worthy spots, such as the Bixby Bridge as it spans a 260-foot-deep ravine or McWay Falls in the Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park as it plunges 80 feet to the beach below.

OKLAHOMA

Wichita Mountains Byway | *www.fhwa.dot.gov/byways*

This 93-mile stretch of road winds through the valleys of the Wichita Mountains and the grasslands of the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge, where sharp-eyed visitors may spot some of the hundreds of bison and elk that roam the refuge.

WASHINGTON

North Cascades Highway | *wsdot.wa.gov/travel/highways-bridges/scenic-byways*

The North Cascades Highway (State Route 20) offers jaw-dropping views of jagged mountain peaks, forested valleys, and vividly colored lakes, such as Diablo Lake (left). The highway crosses North Cascades National Park, home to over 300 glaciers—more than any U.S. park outside of Alaska. This is a trip for fair weather as portions of the road close for several months each year due to snow. ■

QUIZ

Where in the world are you?

1. If you are angling for the perfect photo of the rice terraces at Tegallalang, you are in:

A. Bali, Indonesia
B. Hong Kong

2. If you are on the lookout for mountain gorillas in the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, you are in:

A. Uganda
B. Sudan

3. If you are in a hot air balloon over the plains of Bagan where more than 3,800 ancient temples and pagodas dot the landscape, you are in:

A. China
B. Myanmar

4. If you are exploring the site of the ancient Mayan city of Copán, you are in:

A. Panama
B. Honduras

5. If you are scanning the trees for lemurs in the Rain-forests of the Atsinanana, you are in:

A. Madagascar
B. Thailand

6. If you are counting the Buddha statues (504!) adorning the ancient temple of Borobudur, you are in:

A. Java, Indonesia
B. Sri Lanka

7. If you are admiring a glistening white mausoleum built by a Mughal emperor for his wife's tomb, you are in:

A. Thailand
B. India

8. If you are strolling past a statue of a Merlion (half fish, half lion) that is spouting water into Marina Bay, you are in:

A. Singapore
B. Hong Kong

9. If you are in a helicopter looking down on ancient geoglyphs carved into the Nazca Desert, you are in:

A. Mexico
B. Peru

10. If you are touring El Jem, one of the best preserved Roman amphitheaters in the world, you are in:

A. France
B. Tunisia

ANSWERS: 1–A, 2–A, 3–B, 4–B, 5–A, 6–A, 7–B, 8–A, 9–B, 10–B

Thanks!

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