Farmers Trust Company

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Fed Rides to the Rescue Yet Again

The month of May was challenging for equity investors, as the S&P 500 index dropped more than 6%, essentially cutting the gains realized in the first four months of the year in half. The Trump administration's ratcheting up of tariff threats was largely pinned as the blame for the weakness in markets. What a difference a week makes. In just the first five trading days of June, the benchmark U.S. stock index leapt 4.5% to within a stone's throw of its recent all-time high. So what changed? Did President Trump reach a trade deal with China? Not quite. Much like the Federal Reserve came to the rescue of markets in early January with its promise to keep monetary policy as accommodative as necessary, Fed Chair Jerome Powell sweet talked the markets once again to kick-start the rebound in equity values here in June. Indeed, interest rate markets more or less demanded that the central bank turn toward a bias of lowering rates. The Fed Funds futures market is currently pricing in 0.75% in rate reductions over the coming 12 months. Now we just have to wait and see whether or not Mr. Powell and team are willing to put 'their' money where their mouths are.

What happened to the supposed trade war? Well, at a minimum, clearly the market sees the Fed keeping interest rates low as a much greater positive than it views the current trade skirmish as a negative. It is also possible that the trade situation has never been as big of a deal as some market commentators have suggested. In fact, import prices from China have actually been *falling* over the past few months, suggesting that U.S. consumers are actually benefitting from lower prices on goods as Chinese firms cut prices to offset the effects of the tariffs.

We expect further market volatility in the coming months surrounding the headlines on trade and tariffs, as well as more political theater in general. Nevertheless, the current tussle over trade with China (or any other country for that matter) is unlikely to be the cause of a broader economic downturn.

If we set all the headlines about trade and the Federal Reserve aside and focus on what's actually going on in the global economy, there are some worrisome trends currently in place. We've been trumpeting a "stagflation" theme for much of 2019; however it now appears that inflationary pressures are rapidly deteriorating. This is precisely the reason the Fed is now on full alert to the potential need for lower interest rates. It may also present a challenging environment for certain sectors of the equity market over the next few months. Most at risk are high-valuation growth stocks, many of which tend to reside in the Technology sector. Any pullback may be short-lived; however, assuming the Fed comes to the rescue with plenty of monetary juice to send inflation expectations higher again. For some time now our favored sectors have been Utilities and Real Estate, which consequently have been the two best performing sectors for the past 12 months. These sectors are likely to continue to provide shelter during times of market volatility, and should continue to perform well as economic growth moderates further. A reacceleration in economic growth would change our views, but we have yet to pick up any definitive signals that an inflection in slowing growth rates has been reached.

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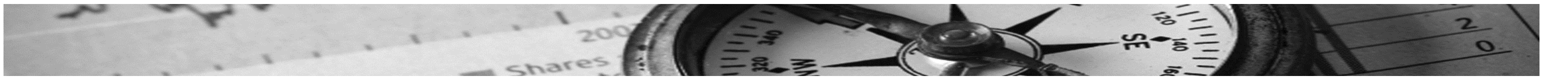

Charitable Giving After Tax Reform

Some of the recent changes to the standard deduction and itemized deductions may affect your ability to obtain an income tax benefit from your charitable contributions. Incorporating charitable giving into your year-end tax planning may be even more important now. If you are age 70½ or older and have a traditional IRA, you may wish to consider a qualified charitable distribution.

Tax reform changes to the standard deduction and itemized deductions may affect your ability to obtain an income tax benefit from charitable giving. Projecting how you'll be affected by these changes while there's still time to take action is important.

Income tax benefit of charitable giving

If you itemize deductions on your federal income tax return, you can generally deduct your gifts to qualified charities. However, many itemized deductions have been eliminated or restricted, and the standard deduction has substantially increased. You can generally choose to take the standard deduction or to itemize deductions. As a result of the changes, far fewer taxpayers will be able to reduce their taxes by itemizing deductions.

Taxpayers whose total itemized deductions other than charitable contributions would be less than the standard deduction (including adjustments for being blind or age 65 or older) effectively have less of a tax savings incentive to make charitable gifts. For example, assume that a married couple, both age 65, have total itemized deductions (other than charitable contributions) of $15,000. They would have a standard deduction of $27,000 in 2019. The couple would effectively receive no tax savings for the first $12,000 of charitable contributions they make. Even with a $12,000 charitable deduction, total itemized deductions of $27,000 would not exceed their standard deduction.

Taxpayers whose total itemized deductions other than charitable contributions equal or exceed the standard deduction (including adjustments for being blind or age 65 or older) generally receive a tax benefit from charitable contributions equal to the income taxes saved. For example, assume that a married couple, both age 65, have total itemized deductions (other than charitable contributions) of $30,000. They would be entitled to a standard deduction of $27,000 in 2019. If they are in the 24% income tax bracket and make a charitable contribution of $10,000, they would reduce their income taxes by $2,400 ($10,000 charitable deduction x 24% tax rate).

However, the amount of your income tax charitable deduction may be limited to certain percentages of your adjusted gross income (AGI). For example, your deduction for gifts of cash to public charities is generally limited to 60% of your AGI for the year, and other gifts to charity are typically limited to 30% or 20% of your AGI. Charitable deductions that exceed the AGI limits may generally be carried over and deducted over the next five years, subject to the income percentage limits in those years.

Year-end tax planning

When making charitable gifts during the year, you should consider them as part of your year-end tax planning. Typically, you have a certain amount of control over the timing of income and expenses. You generally want to time your recognition of income so that it will be taxed at the lowest rate possible, and to time your deductible expenses so they can be claimed in years when you are in a higher tax bracket.

For example, if you expect that you will be in a higher tax bracket next year, it may make sense to wait and make the charitable contribution in January so you can take the deduction next year when the deduction results in a greater tax benefit. Or you might shift the charitable contribution, along with other itemized deductions, into a year when your itemized deductions would be greater than the standard deduction amount. And if the income percentage limits above are a concern in one year, you might consider ways to shift income into that year or shift deductions out of that year, so that a larger charitable deduction is available for that year. A tax professional can help you evaluate your individual tax situation.

Qualified charitable distribution (QCD)

If you are age 70½ or older, you can make tax-free charitable donations directly from your IRAs (other than SEP and SIMPLE IRAs) to a qualified charity. The distribution must be one that would otherwise be taxable to you. You can exclude up to $100,000 of these QCDs from your gross income each year. And if you file a joint return, your spouse (if 70½ or older) can exclude an additional $100,000 of QCDs.

You cannot deduct QCDs as a charitable contribution because the QCD is excluded from your gross income. In order to get a tax benefit from your charitable contribution without this special rule, you would have to itemize deductions, and your charitable deduction could be limited by the percentage of AGI limitations. QCDs may allow you to claim the standard deduction and exclude the QCD from income.

QCDs count toward satisfying any required minimum distributions (RMDs) that you would otherwise have to receive from your IRA, just as if you had received an actual distribution from the plan.

Caution: *Your QCD cannot be made to a private foundation, donor-advised fund, or supporting organization. Further, the gift cannot be made in exchange for a charitable gift annuity or to a charitable remainder trust.*

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Financial Advice for Recent College Graduates

You've put in the hard work as a college student and finally received your diploma. Now you're ready to head out on your own. And though you may not have given much thought to your financial future when you were in college, you have new financial challenges and goals to consider. Fortunately, there are some simple steps you can take to start on the right track with your personal finances.

Set financial goals

Setting goals is an important part of life, especially when it comes to your finances. And though your financial goals will likely change over time, you can always make adjustments in the future. Start out by asking yourself some basic questions about your financial goals, such as whether they are short term (e.g., saving money to buy a car or rent an apartment) or long term (e.g., paying off student loans or buying your own home). Next, ask yourself how important it is to accomplish each goal and determine how much you would need to save for each goal.

Understand the importance of having a budget

A budget is an important part of managing your finances. Knowing exactly how you are spending your money each month can set you on a path to pursue your financial goals. Start by listing your current monthly income. Next, add up all of your expenses. It may help to divide expenses into two categories: fixed (e.g., housing, food, transportation, student loan payments) and discretionary (e.g., entertainment, vacations). Ideally, you should be spending less than you earn. If not, you need to review your expenses and look for ways to cut down on your spending.

Remember that the most important part of budgeting is sticking to it, so you should monitor your budget regularly and make changes as needed. To help stay on track, try to make budgeting a part of your daily routine and be sure to give yourself an occasional reward (e.g., dinner at a restaurant instead of cooking at home).

Establish an emergency fund

An emergency fund is money set aside to protect yourself in the event of an unexpected financial crisis, such as a job loss or medical bills. Typically, you will want to have at least three to six months' worth of living expenses in your cash reserve. Of course, the amount you should save depends on your individual circumstances (e.g., job stability, health status). A good way to establish an emergency fund is to earmark a portion of your paycheck each pay period to help achieve your goal.

Manage your debt situation properly

Whether it's debt from student loans or credit cards, you'll want to avoid the pitfalls that sometimes accompany borrowing. To manage your debt situation properly, keep track of your loan balances and interest rates and develop a plan to manage your payments and avoid late fees. If you need help paying off your student loans, consider the following tips:

- Find out if your employer offers some type of student debt assistance
- Contact your lender about your repayment options
- Consider whether loan consolidation or refinancing is available

Maintain good credit

Having good credit will impact so many different aspects of your financial situation, from obtaining a loan to gaining employment. You can establish and maintain a good credit history by avoiding late payments on existing loans and paying down any debt you may have. In addition, you should monitor your credit report on a regular basis for possible errors or signs of fraud/identity theft.

Determine your insurance needs

Insurance might not be the first thing that comes to mind when you think about your finances. However, having the right amount of insurance is an important part of any financial strategy. Your specific insurance needs will depend on your circumstances. For example, if you rent an apartment, you'll need renters insurance to protect yourself against loss or damage to your personal property. If you own a car, you should have appropriate coverage for that as well. You may also want to evaluate your need for other types of insurance, such as disability and life.

As for health insurance, you have a couple of options. You can usually stay on your parents' insurance until you turn 26. In addition, you may have access to health insurance through your employer or a government-sponsored health plan, or you can purchase your own plan through the federal or state-based Health Insurance Marketplace. For more information, visit healthcare.gov.

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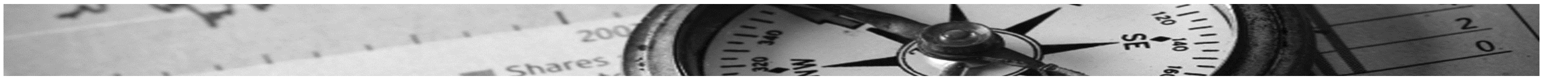

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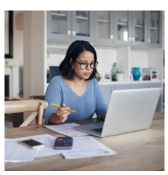
As a business owner, what should I know before adding a financial wellness program?

Financial wellness programs are gaining traction among employee benefit offerings, and for good reason: In an International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans (IFEBP) survey, 96% of employers said employees' personal financial issues had an impact on their overall job performance. If you're thinking of adding a financial wellness program to your benefits lineup, consider the following points.

Understand what "financial wellness" is. In 2014, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) conducted a study to help measure the effectiveness of financial literacy programs. As part of their initial work, researchers sought to define financial well-being. After conducting nearly 60 hours of open-ended interviews with consumers, study authors concluded that financial well-being is achieved when people (1) are able to control day-to-day and month-to-month finances, (2) have the capacity to absorb a financial shock, (3) are on track to meet their financial goals, and (4) have the financial freedom to make choices that allow them to enjoy life.

Assess employee concerns. The IFEBP also found that 40% of employers report an increased demand for financial education. Toward this end, Prosperity Now, a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping all Americans prosper, recommends that employers conduct a needs assessment to determine the most pressing financial concerns of their workforces. While the IFEBP said the top three most popular financial topics covered through such plans are retirement benefits, pre-retirement planning, and budgeting, a workforce composed of relatively young employees may be more concerned with repaying student loans and saving for a down payment on a first home. To position your financial wellness program for success, be sure it's designed to tackle challenges that are specific to your primary employee demographic.

Determine how you will measure your success. Prosperity Now recommends considering the following metrics: participation rates; financial well-being as measured by the CFPB's Financial Well-Being Scale; employee retention, satisfaction with employer, morale, and stress levels; and company cost savings.



What's the real return on your investments?

As an investor, you probably pay attention to *nominal return,* which is the percentage increase or decrease in the value of an investment over a given period of time, usually expressed as an annual return. However, to estimate actual income or growth potential in order to target financial goals — for example, a certain level of retirement income — it's important to consider the effects of taxes and inflation. The remaining increase or decrease is your *real return.*

Let's say you want to purchase a bank-issued certificate of deposit (CD) because you like the lower risk and fixed interest rate that a CD can offer. Rates on CDs have risen, and you might find a two- or three-year CD that offers as much as 3% interest. That could be appealing, but if you're taxed at the 22% federal income tax rate, roughly 0.66% will be gobbled up by federal income tax on the interest.

That still leaves an interest rate of 2.34%, but you should consider the purchasing power of the interest. Annual inflation was about 2% from 2016 to 2018, and the 30-year average was 2.5%.[1] After factoring in the effect of inflation, the real return on your CD investment could approach zero and may turn negative if inflation rises. If so, you might lose purchasing power not only on the interest but also on the principal.

This hypothetical example doesn't represent the performance of any specific investment, but it illustrates the importance of understanding what you're actually earning after taxes and inflation. In some cases, the lower risk offered by an investment may be appealing enough that you're willing to accept a low real return. However, pursuing long-term goals such as retirement generally requires having some investments with the potential for higher returns, even if they carry a higher degree of risk.

The FDIC insures CDs and bank savings accounts, which generally provide a fixed rate of return, up to $250,000 per depositor, per insured institution. All investments are subject to risk, including the possible loss of principal. When sold, investments may be worth more or less than their original cost.

[1] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019 (December year-over-year change in CPI-U)