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Greetings,

Happy New Year! With a new year, many dedicate themselves to new disciplines, convictions, and resolutions. If one of your resolutions concerns your financial health and you would like to schedule a review of your accounts, please do not hesitate calling my office to schedule an appointment. As you scan, the newsletter, I hope you find useful information and encouragement to achieve your 2020 goals and objectives.

Sincerely,

Ross

**January 2020**

Hindsight Is 2020: What Will You Do Differently This Year?

Key Retirement and Tax Numbers for 2020

How Consumers Spend Their Money

Could you survive a no-spend month?



# The Monthly Mu\$e

## *Ideas and concepts to consider*

### **Socially Responsible Investing: Aligning Your Money with Your Values**



Sustainable, responsible, and impact (SRI) investing (also called socially responsible investing) has been around for a long time, but growing interest has moved it into the mainstream. U.S. SRI assets reached \$12 trillion

in 2018, 38% more than in 2016. SRI investments now account for about one-fourth of all professionally managed U.S. assets.<sup>1</sup>

Surveys suggest that many people want their investment dollars to have a positive impact on society.<sup>2</sup> Of course, personal values are subjective, and investors may have very different beliefs and priorities.

But there is also a wider recognition that some harmful business practices can affect a corporation's bottom line and its longer-term prospects. In some instances, good corporate citizenship may boost a company's public image and help create value, whereas shortsighted actions taken to cut costs could cause more expensive damage in the future.

#### **Data-driven decisions**

Services that provide research and ratings for investment analysis may also verify and publish environmental, social, and governance (ESG) data associated with publicly traded companies. Money managers who use SRI strategies often integrate ESG factors with traditional financial analysis. Some examples of ESG issues include environmental practices, employee relations, human rights, product safety and utility, and respect for human rights.

For example, an SRI approach might include companies with positive ESG ratings while screening out companies that raise red flags by creating a high level of carbon emissions, engaging in questionable employment practices, investing in countries with poor human rights records, or profiting from certain products or services (e.g., tobacco, alcohol, gambling, weapons).

Some investors may not want to avoid entire industries. As an alternative, they could use ESG data to compare how businesses in the same industry have adapted to meet social and environmental challenges, and to gain some insight into which companies may be exposed to risks or have a competitive advantage.

#### **Investment vehicles**

Many SRI mutual funds and exchange-traded funds (ETFs) are broad based and diversified, some are actively managed, and others track a particular index with its own universe of SRI stocks.

Specialty funds, however, may focus on a narrower theme such as clean energy; they can be more volatile and carry additional risks that may not be suitable for all investors. It's important to keep in mind that different SRI funds may focus on very different ESG criteria, and there is no guarantee that an SRI fund will achieve its objectives.

The number of mutual funds and ETFs incorporating ESG factors has grown rapidly from 323 in 2012 to 705 in 2018.<sup>3</sup> As the universe of SRI investments continues to expand, so does the opportunity to build a portfolio that aligns with your personal values as well as your asset allocation, risk tolerance, and time horizon.

As with all stock investments, the return and principal value of SRI stocks and investment funds fluctuate with changes in market conditions. Shares, when sold, may be worth more or less than their original cost. Asset allocation and diversification do not guarantee a profit or protect against investment loss.

*Investment funds are sold by prospectus. Please consider the investment objectives, risks, charges, and expenses carefully before investing. The prospectus, which contains this and other information about the investment company, can be obtained from your financial professional. Be sure to read the prospectus carefully before deciding whether to invest.*

<sup>1-3</sup> US SIF Foundation, 2018



### Live within your means

It's easy to want what your friends, colleagues, or neighbors have — and spend money to get those things. That's a mistake. Live within your means, not someone else's.

## Hindsight Is 2020: What Will You Do Differently This Year?

According to a recent survey, 76% of Americans reported having at least one financial regret. Over half of this group said it had to do with savings: 27% didn't start saving for retirement soon enough, 19% didn't contribute enough to an emergency fund, and 10% wish they had saved more for college.<sup>1</sup>

### The saving conundrum

What's preventing Americans from saving more? It's a confluence of factors: stagnant wages over many years; the high cost of housing and college; meeting everyday expenses for food, utilities, and child care; and squeezing in unpredictable expenses for things like health care, car maintenance, and home repairs. When expenses are too high, people can't save, and they often must borrow to buy what they need or want, which can lead to a never-ending cycle of debt.

People make financial decisions all the time, and sometimes these decisions don't pan out as intended. Hindsight is 20/20, of course. Looking back, would you change anything?

### Paying too much for housing

Are housing costs straining your budget? A standard lender guideline is to allocate no more than 28% of your income toward housing expenses, including your monthly mortgage payment, real estate taxes, homeowners insurance, and association dues (the "front-end" ratio), and no more than 36% of your income to cover *all* your monthly debt obligations, including housing expenses plus credit card bills, student loans, car loans, child support, and any other debt that shows on your credit report and requires monthly payments (the "back-end" ratio).

But just because a lender determines how much you can afford to borrow doesn't mean you should. Why not set your ratios lower? Many things can throw off your ability to pay your monthly mortgage bill down the road — a job loss, one spouse giving up a job to take care of children, an unexpected medical expense, tuition bills for you or your child.

**Potential solutions:** To lower your housing costs, consider downsizing to a smaller home (or apartment) in the same area, researching and moving to a less expensive town or state, or renting out a portion of your current home. In addition, watch interest rates and refinance when the numbers make sense.

### Paying too much for college

Outstanding student debt levels in the United States are off the charts, and it's not just students who are borrowing. Approximately 15

million student loan borrowers are age 40 and older, and this demographic accounts for almost 40% of all student loan debt.<sup>2</sup>

**Potential solutions:** If you have a child in college now, ask the financial aid office about the availability of college-sponsored scholarships for current students, or consider having your child transfer to a less expensive school. If you have a child who is about to go to college, run the net price calculator that's available on every college's website to get an estimate of what your out-of-pocket costs will be at that school. Look at state universities or community colleges, which tend to be the most affordable. For any school, understand *exactly* how much you and/or your child will need to borrow — and what the monthly loan payment will be after graduation — before signing any loan documents.

### Paying too much for your car

Automobile prices have grown rapidly in the last decade, and most drivers borrow to pay for their cars, with seven-year loans becoming more common.<sup>3</sup> As a result, a growing number of buyers won't pay off their auto loans before they trade in their cars for a new one, creating a cycle of debt.

**Potential solutions:** Consider buying a used car instead of a new one, be proactive with maintenance and tuneups, and try to use public transportation when possible to prolong the life of your car. As with your home, watch interest rates and refinance when the numbers make sense.

### Keeping up with the Joneses

It's easy to want what your friends, colleagues, or neighbors have — nice cars, trips, home amenities, memberships — and spend money (and possibly go into debt) to get them. That's a mistake. Live within *your* means, not someone else's.

**Potential solutions:** Aim to save at least 10% of your current income for retirement and try to set aside a few thousand dollars for an emergency fund (three to six months' worth of monthly expenses is a common guideline). If you can't do that, cut back on discretionary items, look for ways to lower your fixed costs, or explore ways to increase your current income.

<sup>1</sup> Bankrate's Financial Security Index, May 2019

<sup>2</sup> Federal Reserve Bank of New York, Student Loan Data and Demographics, September 2018

<sup>3</sup> *The Wall Street Journal*, The Seven-Year Auto Loan: America's Middle Class Can't Afford Their Cars, October 1, 2019



## Key Retirement and Tax Numbers for 2020

Every year, the Internal Revenue Service announces cost-of-living adjustments that affect contribution limits for retirement plans and various tax deduction, exclusion, exemption, and threshold amounts. Here are a few of the key adjustments for 2020.

### Employer retirement plans

- Employees who participate in 401(k), 403(b), and most 457 plans can defer up to \$19,500 in compensation in 2020 (up from \$19,000 in 2019); employees age 50 and older can defer up to an additional \$6,500 in 2020 (up from \$6,000 in 2019).
- Employees participating in a SIMPLE retirement plan can defer up to \$13,500 in 2020 (up from \$13,000 in 2019), and employees age 50 and older can defer up to an additional \$3,000 in 2020 (the same as in 2019).

### IRAs

The combined annual limit on contributions to traditional and Roth IRAs is \$6,000 in 2020 (the same as in 2019), with individuals age 50 and older able to contribute an additional \$1,000. For individuals who are covered by a workplace retirement plan, the deduction for contributions to a traditional IRA phases out for the following modified adjusted gross income (MAGI) ranges:

	2019	2020
<b>Single/head of household (HOH)</b>	\$64,000 - \$74,000	\$65,000 - \$75,000
<b>Married filing jointly (MFJ)</b>	\$103,000 - \$123,000	\$104,000 - \$124,000
<b>Married filing separately (MFS)</b>	\$0 - \$10,000	\$0 - \$10,000

**Note:** The 2020 phaseout range is \$196,000 - \$206,000 (up from \$193,000 - \$203,000 in 2019) when the individual making the IRA contribution is not covered by a workplace retirement plan but is filing jointly with a spouse who is covered.

The modified adjusted gross income phaseout ranges for individuals to make contributions to a Roth IRA are:

	2019	2020
<b>Single/HOH</b>	\$122,000 - \$137,000	\$124,000 - \$139,000
<b>MFJ</b>	\$193,000 - \$203,000	\$196,000 - \$206,000
<b>MFS</b>	\$0 - \$10,000	\$0 - \$10,000

### Estate and gift tax

- The annual gift tax exclusion for 2020 is \$15,000, the same as in 2019.
- The gift and estate tax basic exclusion amount for 2020 is \$11,580,000, up from \$11,400,000 in 2019.

### Standard deduction

	2019	2020
<b>Single</b>	\$12,200	\$12,400
<b>HOH</b>	\$18,350	\$18,650
<b>MFJ</b>	\$24,400	\$24,800
<b>MFS</b>	\$12,200	\$12,400

**Note:** The additional standard deduction amount for the blind or aged (age 65 or older) in 2020 is \$1,650 (the same as in 2019) for single/HOH or \$1,300 (the same as in 2019) for all other filing statuses. Special rules apply if you can be claimed as a dependent by another taxpayer.

### Alternative minimum tax (AMT)

	2019	2020
<b>Maximum AMT exemption amount</b>		
<b>Single/HOH</b>	\$71,700	\$72,900
<b>MFJ</b>	\$111,700	\$113,400
<b>MFS</b>	\$55,850	\$56,700
<b>Exemption phaseout threshold</b>		
<b>Single/HOH</b>	\$510,300	\$518,400
<b>MFJ</b>	\$1,020,600	\$1,036,800
<b>MFS</b>	\$510,300	\$518,400
<b>26% rate on AMTI* up to this amount, 28% rate on AMTI above this amount</b>		
<b>MFS</b>	\$97,400	\$98,950
<b>All others</b>	\$194,800	\$197,900
*Alternative minimum taxable income		

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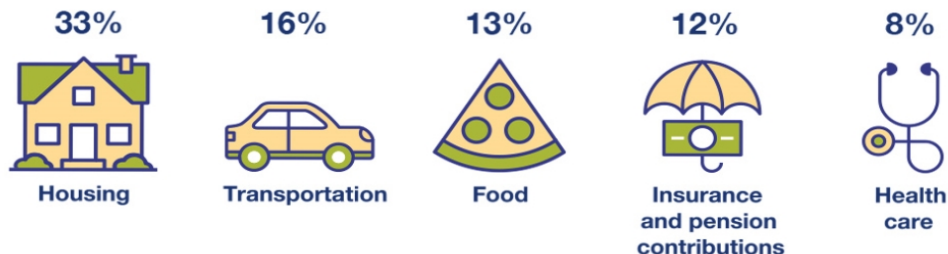
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## How Consumers Spend Their Money

Each year, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports on consumer spending patterns. According to the 2019 report, consumers spent an average of \$61,224 in 2018.\*

### Share of total spending for the top five categories



\*Average annual expenditures per consumer unit. Consumer units include families, single persons living alone or sharing a household with others but who are financially independent, and two or more persons living together who share major expenses.

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Consumer Expenditures 2018, released September 2019



## Could you survive a no-spend month?

Would you take on a 30-day challenge to spend money only on necessities such as rent, utilities, and groceries?

During a no-spend month, many common activities — including dining out, buying movie or concert tickets, and shopping for clothes — are avoided at all costs.

The idea behind a 30-day challenge is that the time period is just long enough to help change bad habits without seeming intolerable. If frugality isn't normally your forte, closely scrutinizing your spending could reap hundreds of dollars in savings. More important, it could help identify ways you might be wasting money on a regular basis.

Start by setting a positive goal for the money. Will you use the extra savings to pay down credit card debt or build up your emergency fund?

Here are some other ways to prepare for a successful challenge.

**Time it right.** Periods that include major holidays, planned vacations from work, and family birthdays are probably not the best for taking on this type of household experiment.

On the other hand, it could be ideal to begin the new year with a "fiscal fast."

**Establish rules.** Take your fixed expenses (i.e., rent/mortgage, utilities, phone bill, insurance payments) into account when planning your no-spend month. Evaluate your typical monthly discretionary spending to figure out where you can reduce or eliminate your spending for the month.

**Plan to break patterns.** Fill up your freezer and pantry with groceries and collect ideas for easy homemade meals. Steer clear of your personal spending triggers, which could mean staying off the Internet or waiting until later to meet up with friends who are big spenders.

**Seek out free and fun entertainment.** You don't have to stay home for an entire month. Spend the day visiting a public park or beach, or look for free concerts, outdoor movies, art festivals, workshops, and other special events hosted by community groups.

**Stay focused.** When you get tempted to spend, remember your goal for the money you've saved. Keep a record of your progress to have a tangible reminder that your efforts will pay off.