

On Your Money

IRS offers taxpayers free help

Contrary to a stereotype held by some, the IRS is not staffed by jack-booted thugs looking to kick down your door in search of your very last dollar. Actually, they wear penny loafers.

I kid the Internal Revenue Service because I love the Internal Revenue Service. The truth is that IRS employees don't enact the laws, they just make sure that taxpayers comply with a tax code



Kevin McKinley

written largely by politicians — some of whom you actually voted for. When it comes to making sure you file and pay your taxes, the operative word for the IRS is not "more," but rather "accurate."

There are several ways the IRS demonstrates how much they want you to get your return right. No, they won't swing by the house to pick up a shoebox full of W-2s and receipts from the Gas 'N' Sip (I checked). But the IRS does provide plenty of programs to guide you through the filing process, and almost always at no charge (in a stinging bit of irony, your tax dollars are already paying for these services).

Quick questions

If you have a specific tax question in search of an answer, you can call the IRS Taxpayer Assistance Line at (800) 829-1040. Keep in mind that depending who's keeping score, the accuracy rate of responses given by the staff at this number has been pegged at anywhere from about 50 percent to 75 percent. That success ratio is "Hall of Fame" as a baseball batting average, but not so good if you're, say, landing a 747 full of passengers.

In defense of the good and decent men and women staffing the phones at the IRS, no single person knows the entire tax code inside and out. Plus, what is contained in the umpteenth-thousand-page code changes every year, and certain parts can be subject to interpretation.

So if you do call the IRS for an answer, write down the response and keep it with your tax records. Having it handy will help you complete your tax form now, and may offer some protection if the IRS challenges this year's filing in the future.

E-filing

The IRS also gives you the opportunity to file your taxes for free online. The aptly named Free File Program is available to the 95 million taxpayers with 2006 adjusted gross income less than \$52,000. Go to www.irs.gov, click on the "Free File" option,

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Business owners concerned

Birch Street overpass project raises pedestrian traffic, safety issues

By Nathan Denton
Leader-Telegram staff

Some owners of businesses near the Birch Street bridge over Hastings Way say they still have mixed feelings about whether the overpass should be replaced with an at-grade intersection.

The Eau Claire City Council voted in January to replace the aging structure with an at-grade intersection with stoplights. Construction is set to begin in 2009.

Bonnie Harper, owner of Bonnie's Labor Temple Lounge on the west side of the bridge, said the key is to "get it done as fast as possible so it doesn't disrupt Birch Street businesses."

"There will be some disruption regardless of what they do," she said. "I can envision a mess."

Harper said another big concern is the heavy pedestrian traffic on the bridge.

"There are a lot of elderly and disabled people who cross it going to the grocery store (Gordy's County Market)," she said.

City Public Works Director Brian Amundson said the project is being planned with bicyclists and foot traffic in mind.

Harper said from her observations, truck traffic has decreased on Birch Street since the U.S. 53 bypass opened in August but automobile traffic has not.

"I hope the idea of replacing the bridge with an on-grade crossing is not based strictly on a decreased amount of traffic," she said.



A moving truck at U-Haul, 603 N. Hastings Way, pointed toward the Birch Street overpass that will be replaced by an at-grade intersection with stoplights in 2009.

Staff photo by Andi Stempniak

"The traffic numbers are down, but there's still a lot of traffic."

Harper said she is surprised that an at-grade crossing was approved, but has no preference "as long as it works for the people using Birch Street and they get it done quickly."

The consensus among patrons of the Labor Temple Lounge is that an at-grade intersection "will be a nightmare," she said. "The ones

who live in the area want the crossing replaced with another bridge."

She said planners should make sure the crossing is user-friendly and doesn't create confusion about "how to get from Point A to Point B."

Regarding the construction cost, Harper said she "can't see how it will be cheaper to put in an at-grade intersection."

"It'll be interesting to see the bottom line," she said.

The at-grade intersection will cost an estimated \$6.5 million. The city will pay \$500,000; the state will pay the balance.

A new bridge would cost an estimated \$9.95 million, with the city's share totaling \$1.7 million.

Greg Feit, general manager of U-Haul Co. on the east side of the bridge, said the proposed changes "won't do anything harmful to businesses."

He said he has noticed less congestion on Hastings Way since the bypass was put in, and he believes stoplights could handle the traffic flow.

"Having Birch Street on grade might make it easier for truck drivers," he said. "Trucks could haul bigger loads toward downtown if they didn't have weight restrictions because of the bridge."

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Associated Press

A cyclo driver talked on his cell phone while waiting for a green light at an intersection in Hanoi, Vietnam. Wireless communication is helping fuel Vietnam's rapid economic growth.

Cell phones play vital role in economic growth

By Malcolm Foster
Associated Press

HANOI, Vietnam — Nguyen Huu Truc's trusty cell phone has revolutionized his small embroidery business — and his life.

When he bought his first mobile phone in 1995, Vietnam had just one fixed-line phone for every 100 people, and cell phones were a pricey novelty. Communication was difficult, forcing Truc to make time-consuming trips to suppliers and buyers.

But these days, Vietnam has 33 telephones per 100 people — and two-thirds of the phones are mobile. Now Truc can make calls on his cell phone from virtually anywhere in the country for about 10 cents a minute, sav-

ing him time and money and providing quicker access to information.

"I cannot imagine what it would be like if I didn't have my mobile phone for a day," he says. "It's no longer just something that only the rich can afford. Now, it's a basic means of communication."

Truc's experience provides a glimpse into how wireless communication is helping fuel Vietnam's rapid growth — and transforming dozens of other developing nations from the ground up.

Today, mobile phones are the primary form of telecommunication in most emerging economies, fulfilling much the same role as fixed-line

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Networking Night attracts wide range of businesses

By Nathan Denton
Leader-Telegram staff

There was a "whole lot of shakin' going on" at Florian Gardens Thursday evening. Handshaking, that is.

More than 200 people from the business communities of Northwest Wisconsin, representing 11 counties, gathered to celebrate Eau Claire's First International Networking Night.

The cost for admission: A business card. A wide range of businesses was represented at the event, from hotel managers to mortgage professionals. Some had tables with professional displays and marketing materials. Other were equipped with just business cards.

"I'm hoping people will come away with a lot of new contacts they wouldn't have made otherwise," said Craig Campana, event organizer and BNI executive director.

The event marked Eau Claire's celebration of International Networking Week (Feb. 5 to 9), sponsored by Business Networking International, which involved simultaneous gatherings of business owners and their representatives in banquet halls and other meet-

ing facilities spanning the globe.

Local BNI chapters promoted events as "a celebration and recognition of the most acknowledged method of business creation today — networking."

The focus of the events was to bring people together to network with each other, to understand the concept of good networking and to listen to talks by key networking specialists.

Clint Gunkel and Chris Hansen, territory managers for Payroll Data Services, a payroll and human resources firm with offices in Madison, Hartland and DePere, attended the event to look for new opportunities in Eau Claire.

"We've got our feelers out," Gunkel said. "We'll be prospecting the area heavily for the next few months."

He said if the company determines that expansion to Eau Claire is feasible, the next step is to hire a territory manager for the area.

"The company would rather hire someone from this area for the position," Gunkel said.

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Staff photo by Nathan Denton

Clint Gunkel, right, and Chris Hansen, of Payroll Data Services, visited with Evelyn Carlile, owner of Simple Office Solutions, at Eau Claire's first International Networking Night.



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