

The needless tax-prep paper chase

Changing how we paid 2018 taxes but not how we filed returns was incompetent



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At 8:30 p.m. Monday, the scene at the Hicksville Post Office on West John Street was about what you'd expect if we held an annual festival to glorify sadness, anger and fear.

Monday was the last day to send 2018 tax returns and money owed without a penalty. And Hicksville, open until 9 p.m. Monday through Friday, is the only post office on Long Island that stays open so late. It's a magnet for patrons trying to get a procrastinated postmark.

Police directed traffic. Frantic filers tried to find parking. And as I commiserated and waited to get the time stamp of virtue on my own envelope, I imagined the glorious day when this madness ends.

There is no reason for most of us to file returns, and no justification for most of us computing our own liability. It's crazy,

Imagine that, each month, all credit card users had to take a blank form and list everything they bought with their cards along with what they paid, then attach a check for the total owed: "Honey, how much was dinner at T.J. Taterskins? I remember ordering the first 11 martinis and a small bowl of queso, but the next six hours are a blur. I can't find the receipt. I know you destroyed a stuffed moose head for 'eyeballing' me, but what does something like that cost?"

This would be a silly way to figure out how much you owe, since the Visa people are great at adding it up and billing for it. But for most of us, filling out our own tax returns and hunting down our own documentation makes just as little sense.

Our employers tell the governments how much we earn, and how much tax we pay to each level of government, how much we spend on health insurance and tax-advantaged retirement and health-savings accounts. Our banks tell the government how much mortgage

interest we pay, and often how much property tax we pay.

Why does the government then ask us to tell it the same things, and send it copies of the same forms our employers and banks send, and make it all so complicated that many of us must hire help to do it?

And all those deductions! Does your bedroom count as a home office if you've been taking care of business? (No.) Are long pants a work expense if you wear only cargo shorts at all other times? (No.)

It's a process that's become even more unnecessary now, when thanks to the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, the Joint Committee on Taxation estimates 88 percent of the nation's 150 million tax filers won't itemize federal returns.

These tax changes, pushed by President Donald Trump, had mixed results when it comes to how much we pay. But the combination of doubling the standard deduction to \$24,000 for couples and limit-



Taxpayers cram the Hicksville post office Monday night to beat the filing deadline.

NEWSDAY/LANE FILLER

whether we paid the wrong amount, and send us a bill or a check.

Changing how we pay taxes for 2018 without changing how we file was just incompetence.

Many taxpayers in many countries do not have to file. In England, where the correct amount is generally deducted from paychecks, 90 percent of taxpayers don't file. According to the Brookings Institution's Tax Policy Center, at least 36 countries permit return-free filing for some workers.

Most of us pay taxes based on withholding brackets provided by the government, and withholding forms we fill out. The charts should be right and the forms should ask the proper questions to determine how much we need to pay. If something goes wrong and we end up paying too much or too little, let us know. Otherwise, leave us alone.

Lane Filler is a member of Newsday's editorial board.



A representative of a tax-preparation firm in Miami warns bypassers about the federal deadline to file income taxes on Monday.

GETTY IMAGES / JOE RAEDLE

The effects of the new tax law

I always wonder why people expecting an income-tax refund are happy, and those who must pay are not ["Learning curve for new tax law," News, April 15].

Those getting a refund are simply being repaid for the no-

interest loan they gave the government in the previous year. Those who must write a check are paying the IRS or state for a loan they received.

Kind of reminds you of Christmas club accounts at banks. Deposit a fixed amount in your account each week and in mid-December, the bank will send you a check for the full

amount. Thankfully, then-state Attorney General Louis Lefkowitz demanded that banks pay interest. The result, fewer Christmas club promotions.

Tom Focone, Stony Brook

I am self-employed as an actor and teacher of Shakespeare. Now that none of my legitimate personal expenses are allowed as deductions — including union dues, commissions to agents or managers, and costs for promotional purposes — I find that although I earned less money in 2018, I am paying more than \$400 more in taxes. I am one of many people who are not wealthy enough to benefit from President Donald Trump's supposed tax reform.

Despite his boasts of universal tax relief, we are seeing clearly that the relief most benefits those who financially need it least, while hitting hardest those who rely on earned in-

come to make a living.

"This is the time that the un-just man doth thrive," as Shakespeare said.

Elizabeth Shepherd, Manhattan

Talk about burying the lead. I had to wade through a lot of noise in your article on the impact of the new tax law before I read "about 80 percent of filers paid less in federal taxes in 2018."

That's the story. The size of refunds is meaningless; total taxes paid should be your focus.

John McKeown, Massapequa Park

I have read that many taxpayers are upset about their diminished income-tax refunds, or even worse, found that they owed money.

I think these people need to take personal accountability for not preparing for the new tax law. First, a refund is just that, a return of money you lent the

government interest free for a year. So what if it's less; that probably means you had more money in your paycheck throughout 2018. If your overall tax bill is less than last year, that's really all that matters. If you didn't save your extra pay all year long, that's on you.

Rafe Garet, West Babylon

Why use Social Security card for ID?

After reading "In the fast lane at the local DMV" [Opinion, April 14], I would like to remind the Department of Motor Vehicles that my Social Security Card says on it, "Not for identification." So why do they require it?

Thomas Nasca, Blue Point

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