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NEW TRAP ALERT
(ELECTRONIC FILERS BEWARE)

Income tax laws and rules abound with traps for the unwary – especially for high income taxpayers. A new trap for 2018 for electronically filed (almost all) state income tax returns is the “10-day rule.” This state-mandated rule promises only 10 days for the taxpayer to review the tax return and return the filing authorization to the preparer. After 10 days, the return may be rejected as stale. If rejected, the return must be recompiled before filing and may require a new signed electronic

authorization form. Accordingly, the route to cost-effective preparation is a prompt review of the income tax return by the taxpayer and the return of the signed electronic filing authorization.

Quick review and prompt return of the filing authorization to the tax return preparer are in the taxpayer’s best interest as it will remove the possibility of additional time, effort, and expense in completing the filing.

OOPS, ON DOUBLE STATE TAXATION

The attached *Tax & Business Alert* includes as the first article, “*Multistate Resident? Watch Out for Double Taxation*,” which contains, in its first sentence, an error. The article discusses the same income being subjected to state income taxes by two different states – that is, “double taxation” by the states. It opens with an incorrect statement “...there’s nothing in the U.S. Constitution or federal law that prohibits multiple states from collecting tax on the same income.” To the contrary, there is the Interstate Commerce Clause of the U.S. Constitution, which reserves for the federal government the regulation of interstate commerce. At least two state Supreme Courts (Louisiana is one of them, see *Smith v. Robinson*, Louisiana Supreme Court, 2018) have ruled that the U.S. Constitution prevents a

taxpayer from being taxed by his home state on income attributable to another state without being allowed credit for the tax paid to that other state. The Supreme Court of Maryland similarly ruled in *Wynne* that Maryland’s taxing of out-of-state income without allowing a credit for tax paid to the foreign state violated the federal Constitution. The Supreme Courts of both Maryland and Louisiana recognized that allowing a second tax by the home state on the income earned out of that state is, in the words of the Maryland Supreme Court, “an incentive for taxpayers to opt for intrastate rather than interstate economic activity.”

Even though the U.S. Constitution protects taxpayers from this double state income taxes, the domicile or home state of a taxpayer

(Continued on reverse)

makes a significant difference in the combined federal and state income tax burden. For example, a resident of the Ark-La-Tex living in Louisiana with dividends, interests, royalties, or other investment income from East Texas but working in Louisiana and residing in Louisiana with a spouse working in East Texas (Texas does not have an individual income tax) would pay Louisiana income tax at rates up to six percent on all of the income of the couple. That same Ark-La-Tex couple living in Waskom, Texas would pay Louisiana income tax only on the husband's employment earnings as the wife's earnings and their investment income would not be taxed.

That same couple living in Springhill, Louisiana with one of the couple working in

Arkansas (which has an individual income tax) would pay Louisiana income tax on all of their income but, according to the Louisiana Supreme Court's reading of the U.S. Constitution, must be allowed a credit against the Louisiana income tax in the amount of the Arkansas tax paid. However, Louisiana may limit its credit to the amount of Louisiana tax applicable to the Arkansas income.

Taxpayers who spend significant time in two different states should consider the suggestions of the article concerning choices in driver's license, voting registration, bank accounts, etc. to ensure tax treatment as domiciled in the state they choose as their home state.

WHAT'S DIFFERENT ABOUT 2018 INDIVIDUAL INCOME TAX RETURNS?

The Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of December 2017 made extensive changes in individual income taxation, most of which became effective January 1, 2018 and are scheduled to reverse on January 1, 2026. A few of the many 2018 federal changes are mentioned below.

- Individual "Qualified Business Income" Deductions from a Pass-Through LLC, Partnership, S Corporation, or a Sole Proprietorship – This new 20 percent deduction is available on 2018 individual returns for pass-through entities and sole proprietorships. The deduction is, however, severely limited or denied for most high-income professional practices. It is also denied or limited for most other businesses for high income taxpayers whose businesses do not make significant salary and wage payments or do not have significant depreciable assets.
- Lower Income Tax Rates and Brackets – The top federal income tax rate for individuals

is now 37 percent plus the 3.8 percent add-on Medicare Tax on investment income, for a combined 40.8 percent, down from 43.4 percent (39.6 percent plus 3.8 percent for 2017). However, for some middle and upper bracket taxpayers, the new rules disallowing or limiting itemized deductions might offset the rate reductions.

- Increased Standard Deduction – The deduction is now \$24,000 for married individuals on a joint return, \$18,000 for head of household filers, and \$12,000 for all other individuals.
- Eliminated Personal and Dependent Exemptions – These exemptions are suspended through 2025.
- Modified Kiddie Tax on Unearned Income – This tax computation for minor children and certain students will now be made using trust tax rates (top bracket starts at \$12,500) rather than using the parents' top rate (joint return top bracket starts at \$600,000).

- Eliminated Personal Casualty and Theft Loss Deductions – These deductions are suspended through 2025.
- Limited State and Local Tax Deductions – The aggregate of the deductions for state and local taxes generally is limited to \$10,000 through 2025. State and local taxes related to business and investment property continue to be fully deductible.
- Limited Mortgage Interest Deduction – For home acquisition loans made during years 2018 through 2025, the interest deduction is limited to the interest on \$750,000 of debt (\$375,000 for married filing separately). For the same period, the interest deduction for home equity loans (i.e., the proceeds are not used for home purchase or improvement) is eliminated.
- Denied Charitable Contribution – No charitable contribution deduction is allowed where the contribution entitles the taxpayer to purchase tickets or seating at a college athletic event.
- Suspended Miscellaneous Itemized Deductions – These deductions are suspended through 2025. Like the \$10,000 limit on personal state and local tax deduction, this change will result in a significant tax increase for many high-income tax payers.
- Modified Individual Alternative Minimum Tax Retained – The individual AMT was retained but with an increased alternative minimum taxable income threshold of \$70,300 for single individuals and \$109,400 for joint returns.
- Increased Business Property Expensing – 100 percent cost recovery (expensing) will now be available for certain tangible, personal, new and used property.
- Limited Business Interest Deduction – Businesses with gross receipts exceeding \$25 million (and those defined as “tax shelters”) are subject to a limitation on the deduction of business interest. Exceptions to the limitation are provided for floor plan financing (for dealers selling vehicles, boats, and farm equipment), for electing real property businesses, and for electing farm businesses.
- Limited Net Operating Loss (NOL) Deduction – The NOL deduction generally will be limited to 80 percent of taxable income (down from 100 percent). Also, with some exceptions (e.g., farm losses), the NOL can no longer be carried back to obtain tax refunds from prior years. It can only be carried forward to reduce tax in future years.
- Eliminated Domestic Production Activity Deduction – This deduction has been repealed.
- Limited Like-kind Exchange Treatment – The tax-deferred exchange of like-kind property is now limited to real estate. For example, the trade-in of a business vehicle will now be a taxable event and, because of the very limited annual depreciation deduction, will often result in a deductible loss. However, for business pick-up trucks and SUVs that have been fully expensed, a taxable gain will be recognized.

HOW TO ESTABLISH DOMICILE

Under the law of each state, tax credits are available only with respect to income taxes that are “properly due” to another state. But, when two states each claim you as a domiciliary, neither believes that taxes are properly due to the other. To avoid double taxation in this situation, you’ll need to demonstrate your intent to abandon your domicile in one state and establish it in the other.

There are various ways to do so. For example, you might obtain a driver’s license and register your car in the new state. You could also open bank accounts in the new state and use your new address for important financially related documents (such as insurance policies, tax returns, passports and wills). Other effective measures may include registering to vote in the new jurisdiction, subscribing to local newspapers and seeing local health care providers. Bear in mind, of course, that laws regarding domicile vary from state to state.

MINIMIZE UNNECESSARY TAXES

This example illustrates just one way double taxation can arise when you divide your time between two or

more states. Our firm can research applicable state law and identify ways to minimize exposure to unnecessary taxes. ■

YOU’VE GOT TIME: SMALL BUSINESSES CAN STILL SET UP A 2018 SEP PLAN

Are you a high-income small-business owner who doesn’t currently have a tax-advantaged retirement plan set up for yourself? A Simplified Employee Pension (SEP) plan may be just what you need, and now may be a great time to establish one.

A SEP plan has high contribution limits and is simple to set up. Best of all, there’s still time to establish one for 2018 and make contributions to it that you can deduct on your 2018 income tax return.

2019 DEADLINES FOR 2018

A SEP plan can be set up as late as the due date (including extensions) of your income tax return for the tax year for which the plan is to first apply. That means you can establish a plan for 2018 in 2019 if you do it before your 2018 return filing deadline. You have until the same deadline to make 2018 contributions and still claim a potentially hefty deduction on your 2018 return.

Generally, other types of retirement plans would have to have been established by December 31, 2018, for 2018 contributions to be made (though many of these plans do allow 2018 contributions to be made in 2019).

HIGH CONTRIBUTION LIMITS

Contributions to SEP plans are discretionary. You can decide how much to contribute each year. But be aware that, if your business has employees other than you, 1) contributions must be made for all eligible

employees using the same percentage of compensation as for you, and 2) employee accounts are immediately 100% vested. The contributions go into SEP-IRAs established for each eligible employee.

For 2018, the maximum contribution that can be made to a SEP-IRA is 25% of compensation (or 20% of self-employed income net of the self-employment tax deduction) of up to \$275,000, subject to a contribution cap of \$55,000. (The 2019 limits are \$280,000 and \$56,000, respectively.)



SIMPLE TO SET UP

A SEP plan is established by completing and signing the very simple Form 5305-SEP (“Simplified Employee Pension — Individual Retirement Accounts Contribution Agreement”). Form 5305-SEP isn’t filed with the IRS, but it should be maintained as part of

the business's permanent tax records. A copy of the form must be given to each employee covered by the plan, along with a disclosure statement.

Because of their simplicity and the great flexibility you have in making contributions, SEP plans are good "starter" retirement plans for small businesses. They're also well suited for cash-flow dependent businesses such as construction companies, restaurants

and seasonal businesses that may not always have dollars at the ready to contribute.

LESS ONEROUS

Additional rules and limits do apply to these plans, but they're generally much less onerous than those for other retirement plans. Contact our firm to learn more about SEP plans and how they might reduce your tax bill for 2018 and beyond. ■

FEWER TAXPAYERS TO QUALIFY FOR HOME OFFICE DEDUCTION

Working from home has become commonplace for people in many jobs. But just because you have a home office space doesn't mean you can deduct expenses associated with it. Beginning with the 2018 tax year, fewer taxpayers will qualify for the home office deduction. Here's why.

CHANGES UNDER THE TCJA

For employees, home office expenses used to be a miscellaneous itemized deduction. Way back in 2017, this meant one could enjoy a tax benefit only if these expenses plus other miscellaneous itemized expenses (such as unreimbursed work-related travel, certain professional fees and investment expenses) exceeded 2% of adjusted gross income.

Starting in 2018 and continuing through 2025, however, employees can't deduct *any* home office expenses. Why? The Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (TCJA) suspends miscellaneous itemized deductions subject to the 2% floor for this period.

Note: If you're self-employed, you can still deduct eligible home office expenses against your self-employment income during the 2018 through 2025 period.

OTHER ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

If you're self-employed, generally your home office must be your principal place of business, though there are exceptions.

Whether you're an employee or self-employed, the space must be used regularly (not just occasionally) and exclusively for business purposes. If, for example, your home office is also a guest bedroom or your children do their homework there, you can't deduct the expenses associated with that space.

DEDUCTION OPTIONS

If eligible, you have two options for claiming the home office deduction. First, you can deduct a portion of your mortgage interest, property taxes, insurance, utilities and certain other expenses, as well as the depreciation allocable to the office space. This requires calculating, allocating and substantiating actual expenses.



A second approach is to take the "safe harbor" deduction. Here, only one simple calculation is necessary: \$5 multiplied by the number of square feet of the office space. The safe harbor deduction is capped at \$1,500 per year, based on a maximum of 300 square feet.

MORE RULES AND LIMITS

Be aware that we've covered only a few of the rules and limits here. If you think you may qualify for the home office deduction on your 2018 return or would like to know if there's anything additional you need to do to become eligible, contact us. ■

THROWING SNOWBALLS AT YOUR MOUNTAIN OF DEBT

Many people start the year intending to get out of debt, yet end the year owing just as much, if not more. One approach that might yield success is called “throwing snowballs.”

Under this method, you organize your debts from the lowest balance to the highest balance and begin paying off the debt on top of the list. The idea is to throw as many “snowballs” as you can gather or earn at that first creditor until the debt is gone.

While you hurl these snowballs, pay the minimum amount to your other creditors. Avoid trying to send an extra \$20 or so a month to each one. If you want to contribute extra money, throw it at your primary target.

Once the first debt is paid off, you should have even more money to send to the next one. Over time you can start heaving bigger and bigger snowballs at the remaining targets because, as you pay off each debt, you’ll have more money to pay toward remaining debts.



The objective is to start an avalanche of payoffs until your debts disappear. Under this method, the best predictor of success isn’t the number of dollars you pay off but rather the number of accounts that you close.

Please note: There’s some debate on the practicality of throwing snowballs. Opponents argue that you should first pay off debts with the highest interest rates. We can help you choose a debt-reduction strategy that’s right for you. ■