

Tax burden unacceptable - Knollenberg, panel

The average American family last year spent more money on taxes than for food, clothing and housing, said U.S. Congressman Joe Knollenberg during Wednesday night's Tax Day panel discussion at the Oakland Community College Orchard Ridge campus in Farmington Hills.

"And I don't think that's acceptable," said Knollenberg, R-Bloomfield Township.

Knollenberg, despite some sharp critical barbs from the mostly senior citizen audience at the Wallace Smith Theatre, reiterated his desire to see tax relief for Americans - perhaps as he outlined in the 1997 Taxpayers Relief Act legislation that would cut federal taxes by \$170 billion over the next five years and change Tax Day from April 15 to Nov. 1. The current tax rate of

nearly 40 percent could be sliced to 17 percent over that span if a flat tax system were implemented.

Meanwhile, other panelists also expressed concerns over the current, convoluted, complicated tax system and the fact that, on average, Americans do not begin earning money for themselves every year until May.

"It's got to be simpler, fairer and a reduction from where we sit today," said David Sowerby, vice president and portfolio manager for Loomis, Sayles & Co. and a Farmington Hills resident.

Tax Freedom Day is May 9th. This presidency talks about the 1960s and Camelot ... Tax Freedom Day then was in early April."

John Mach, director of tax at Plante & Moran, said criticism of the current tax system is well-deserved, simply because it is one that cannot be understood

by most people. He said, in 1995, about 50 percent of working Americans used tax preparers like him to do their annual income tax forms.

"The conversations of our system is that it's a self-assessment system," Mach said. "There's a major problem with the system when the average individual doesn't feel confident enough to do their own taxes ... I can't keep up with it all and I'm in this field. So I really pity the folks who have to comply on their own with a system that's too complicated."

Moderator Paul Welday, Knollenberg's chief of staff, asked the panel why there are some 50 pages of Schedule D, one of the more-complicated forms mentioned by Mach. By comparison, with the flat tax system as proposed, complying would be as easy as filling out a postcard.

"There are many special interests who don't want to change anything, absolutely nothing," Knollenberg explained. "And they're going to be the obstruction, the hurdle that you have to go over. It's just going to take time before we educate the American people."

During the subsequent portion of the forum where panelists answered questions from the audience, several took Knollenberg to task for not following through on earlier promises to help get the beleaguered Social Security system back on track.

"... Over a year ago, I asked you about the injustice of being

taxed on income I paid taxes on all my life," said one clearly agitated audience member, looking in Knollenberg's direction. "I was hoping to see you on TV ... exhorting your colleagues to do something. But ... you've left me in the lurch."

Also discussed was the notion that there isn't any solution, be it a flat tax or national sales tax (also discussed at the forum), to help eradicate the huge national debt.

"The public is being misled," opined one audience member, about the talk of a balanced budget. "We'll still add \$170 billion

per year to our debt. What are the effects of the debt on the economy?"

Sowerby emphasized that the debt is "out there, it's nebulous. I tell people it's a black hole that sucks out your money to pay for government. Your ... mortgage rate could be 4.5 or 5 percent today if we didn't have all of that debt."



Joe Knollenberg

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The government's spending frenzy in Washington, D.C., is the main culprit, Hubbard said. It is the tax-paying public that foots the bill.

"What's driving this whole tax issue is the spending process in Washington is out of control," said Hubbard, who was one of the relatively few younger persons in the auditorium. The crowd was predominantly over 60 years old. "So the hunt and search for revenue is obsessive. This has been 30, 40, even 50 years in the making."

Empathy found

The forum provided Hubbard with some empathy for Knollenberg and other legislators concerning the arduous road toward getting a bill passed.

"To get 280 people to agree is difficult," he said. "Getting four buddies to agree on something on a weekend is tough."

Hubbard also said that, until federal government spending is contained, the ongoing debate between going to a flat income tax (essentially charging everybody the same amount, regardless of income bracket) or other tax-cutting measures is meaningless. "It's like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic."

One of the subjects discussed by the panel was to move the filing deadline to November. According to Hubbard, that might have a positive impact.

"That would motivate people to think about who they're voting for," Hubbard said. "It might be a start."

Another audience member at Wednesday's forum was Mike Hayes of Livonia. He said he backs implementing a national sales tax instead of a flat tax, and abolishing the income tax. "With a national sales tax, it would be easier (for the government) to draw in revenue" from now untapped sources.

Hayes said he was disappointed that more people under age 50 didn't attend the forum, particularly since the flawed Social Security system was one of the hot topics.

"In order for there to be real changes that impact my life and yours," he said, "we need more people from our age group to get active."

Southfield's Roger Hane said the program was beneficial because he learned more about tax legislation attempting to make its way through Washington and into law.

"It was good to hear the other panelists (besides Knollenberg) talk about their concerns about the tax system," Hane said.

He also likes the idea of a flat tax "for sheer fairness. (But) it has to work backwards from what the federal budget is. So the budget has to be addressed" as much, if not more, than the tax rate.

Wisconsin Mayor Michael McDonald was one of the last to leave the auditorium.

'Lot of guts'

"It took a lot of guts to hold this on April 15th," McDonald said. "A lot of people sent their checks out today."

McDonald also thinks a flat tax, possibly 17 percent, might make the most sense. He also agreed with the panelists about letting local and state government, including school districts, do more for their constituents than federal government.

"No, I don't want to send money to Washington so they can send it back to me," McDonald continued. "I'd rather spend it locally."

That can be attained with "fewer federal mandates and more local control."

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