

Celebrating Earth Day with Tax Day Rebates

Have you filed your taxes yet? If you've started them, then you're ahead of us – it's next on the list right after I finish writing this article (yikes!). Of course there's an added incentive to get them done and filed this year. We're all looking forward eagerly to those glorious rebate checks, intended to spark the economy.

How are you going to spend yours?

Some people, frustrated by our government's mishandling of finances and the environment, are calling for the money to go straight into our savings accounts as a form of protest. But I'm thinking it would be better to put the rebate money to work in the way it should have been used – in a way that will help with the climate challenge, create jobs, spur the new green energy economy, and provide financial relief all at once.

If we spend the rebate well, our reduced utility bills will continue to provide extra cash well into the future. Think of it as an investment, with dividends, in a fund that's not affected by the ups and downs of the stock market. Looking at the big picture, the rebates can pay us all a future dividend, if they're invested in improvements that will help cool the planet and save energy, helping to control future food and fuel bills for everyone.

So let's celebrate Earth day and Tax day together this year - here are a few smart investments that will save cash over time:

1. an energy-efficient appliance – energy star refrigerators, freezers, washers, driers, and dishwashers save electricity and water.
2. a more efficient hot water heater – go from electric to natural gas, or to a tankless hot water heater, or go completely carbon neutral and invest in a solar hot water system to free yourself from the unpredictable cost of fuel altogether – just think – guilt-free hot showers!
3. a more efficient, lower-emission lawn mower, like an electric or solar lawn mower. Or go carbon-neutral and save on your gym fees as well, and get a manual reel-mower. Check out the “lawn-sweepers” for quiet, fuel- and emission-free leaf collection.
4. a more efficient furnace. Or have your existing furnace and ducts tightened up for maximum efficiency.
5. more or better insulation for your home, or energy efficient windows
6. an energy audit, so you'll know where to start with your improvements. The Energy Star website is a good place to start, with an interactive self-audit that's tailored to your home.
7. energy efficient electronics for your home. Electronics consume as much as 25% of your home's electricity use – replacing them with Energy Star appliances can reduce that by more than half.

8. a tree for the south or west side of your house, to lower your cooling bills and maximize comfort. Check the changes in the planting zones at <http://www.arborday.org/media/mapchanges.cfm> so you get varieties that can handle the changing Ohio climate.
9. a fruit tree or garden for the ultimate local food, and lower grocery bills. Or use the rebate to increase your budget for “local and organic” food.
10. a tune-up for your car. Or if you need a new car, put the rebate toward a hybrid.
11. a bike, or an electric moped, or “saddlebags” or a basket to make your bike more useful.
12. replace all the lights in your home with compact fluorescent light bulbs to immediately reduce your electricity bills by as much as 20%!

For even more mileage from the rebates, let your senators and representatives know how you are spending the money, and ask them for future tax incentives to make more energy efficiency and renewable energy improvements.

And of course there are many inexpensive and fun ways to celebrate Earth day (April 22). The Mayor’s Green Task Force would like to challenge you to try turning off all but one light, as well as all appliances (yes, even the TV and computer!) from 8 - 9 pm on Earth day. The energy you save in that hour will be a drop in the bucket, but it will help our families to become more aware of the ways in which we use electricity, and maybe we can identify a few lights or appliances that can be left off, or un-plugged, after the hour has gone by.

For more fun, you can visit the Cleveland Zoo’s Earth Fest on Sunday, April 20th; for something wilder, visit Kent’s festival, “Who’s your Mama?” April 16th- 20th. Or take the family for a hike at a local park, or the nature center. But let’s also celebrate Earth day in a way that will have lasting benefits for our budgets, and for the Earth – consider an energy-wise investment of your rebate check, and start collecting those dividends.

Check it out:

Earth Fest at the Cleveland Zoo, Sunday April 20th:
http://earthdaycoalition.org/programs_earthfest.php

Akron “LightsOutAkron” from 8 – 9 pm for Earth day on April 22:
http://www.ohio.com/news/top_stories/17148601.html

Kent’s “Who’s your Mama?” Earth day festival, April 16 – 20: <http://www.whosyourmama.org/>

Energy Star website, for information on energy efficient products and improvements for your home, business, industry, <http://www.arborday.org/media/zones.cfm> or house of worship:
<http://www.energystar.gov/>