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Congress seeks system for charity contributions

By JIM LUTHER
Of the Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Treasury Department is trying to head off efforts by members of Congress to use the Internal Revenue Service as a collection agency to raise funds for their pet charities.

Under bills pending in the House and Senate, a person could direct the IRS to turn over to selected charities part of his or her tax refund. If the person was not due a refund but owed taxes, he or she could enclose with the tax payment a check which IRS would turn over to the charity.

The bills would benefit only the U.S. Olympic Committee, for the training of amateur athletes, and the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities, which support the performing and fine arts.

But Treasury officials fear that if the idea takes hold, there'll be no ending it. And they ask why the Olympic Committee and the arts should get such benefits while other charities do not.

"We do not believe that federal tax returns, or the federal tax-collection system, should be used as a vehicle for voluntary contributions to any charity or cause, however meritorious," Assistant Treasury Secretary John E. Chapoton told the Senate Finance taxation subcommittee last week.

"If a voluntary checkoff of the kind proposed by (the bills) were incorporated on tax returns, the floodgates would be opened for other charities and worthwhile causes to request a similar checkoff system," he said.

The proposals should not be confused with the checkoff now provided on tax returns for financing presidential campaigns. Current law allows a person to earmark \$1 of his or her taxes for the campaign fund. But a person's tax liability is not changed by checking the campaign-fund box on the tax return.

The new proposals would not earmark taxes for any charities. But it would allow the Olympic Committee and the arts and humanities endowments to use the IRS tax system to collect their contributions.

Local electronics firms enshrouded by 'fiscal fog'

SEATTLE (AP) — The quirky nature of the recession has Northwest electronics industry executives "walking around in a fiscal fog," says one business official.

Industry planners, hit hard by the 1975 recession, thought they had learned enough from that experience to stay out of trouble in a future recession. But then the rules of recession changed.

Past recessions were short and deep, with sales and production graphs dipping sharply. This one is long and shallow; interest rates have stayed high over a long period and the downturn has hit Europe as well.

Even if farseeing fiscal planners had foretold the nature of the current recession, John Fluke, chairman of the Everett-based electronic test instrument maker that bears his name, says, "I don't know if I'd have believed it." He coined the term "fiscal fog" to describe the industry's puzzlement.

Actually it was the actions electronics companies took just after the 1975 recession that got them into trouble today, forcing industry-wide layoffs.

Having cut back when the 1975 recession hit, companies were unprepared when demand

"This is America. Business went down, stock prices went down and they cut back."

finally strengthened. That allowed strong Japanese competitors, who never stopped building, to sweep into the semiconductor market and gain a hold. In the last five years, Japanese semiconductor exports to the U.S. market increased eightfold to nearly \$400 million.

Semiconductors, the silicon wafers with the electronic circuitry to form computer brains, are considered a basic commodity of the electronics industry. The makers also are major users of test equipment manufactured by such Northwest companies as Fluke and Tektronix of Beaverton, Ore.

Promising itself it would never be caught unprepared for a strong demand again, the semiconductor industry kept production lines going through 1979 and 1980, but prices collapsed because supplies were so high.

"This is America. Business went down, stock prices went

down and they cut back," says Jerry Wasserman, an information systems industry expert at Arthur D. Little Inc., a think tank in Cambridge, Mass.

And the 1980 recession hit European customers who buy a great deal of American electronics products. Fluke calls the simultaneous recessions on both sides of the Atlantic "a rare occurrence, the first I can remember."

And a stronger dollar forced American companies to raise their prices in European currency to receive the same amount of dollars — further depressing sales.

"It's hard to raise prices into a weak economy," says Fletcher Chamberlin, assistant treasurer at Tektronix. But the alternative was reduced profit margins from foreign trade, and Tektronix sells about 40 percent of its product outside this country.

Fluke's product prices had to go up 30 to 40 percent, "which results in not selling much."

emu Cultural Forum

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