



# The Balance Sheet

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Cornell Cooperative Extension's Family Economics and Resource  
Management Program Work Team*

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## Inside this issue:

**\*Tax Time is Here Again**

**Happy Reading —  
Theresa Mayhew, Editor**

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## **Tax Time is Here Again**

**By Barb Henza, CCE Cortland County**

It's that time of year again: Tax season is back. While it is hardly anyone's favorite time of year, there are some things you can do to make it, well, less taxing.

Whether you fill in the forms yourself using software or go to a paid preparer there are steps you can take to make the process go smoothly. First, have all of your records ready before you start filling in the forms. Pull together the receipts or checks you have that will support any deductions you plan to take on your return. Watch for W-2's and 1099's that will be arriving soon from employers and financial institutions. It's a good idea to make a list of all of the W-2's and 1099's you expect to receive for 2017. Put the list in a folder and check off the documents as they come in to avoid having any documents come in after you have filed showing income that should have been included on your return. Forms should be in the mail to you by January 31. Many employers and financial institutions are now making the documents available electronically, allowing you to access the information sooner.

Once you have all the necessary documents, decide how you will file your return this year. Will you fill in the forms yourself or have someone else prepare them for you?

If you don't want to complete the forms yourself you have several options available to you. You can go to a paid preparer and have them fill out and file the forms for you for a fee. There are also options available online for free electronic filing through IRS.gov for taxpayers who meet the income criteria. Individuals and families with an adjusted gross income less than \$66,000 per year can take advantage of the IRS program. New York State also has a free file option available at <http://www.tax.ny.gov/pit/efile/> for eligible taxpayers.

Another option for preparing your returns is using the free Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program sponsored by the IRS and New York State. Both Federal and New York State tax returns will be completed and electronically filed by the program. All volunteers working with the program are required to pass IRS tests with a minimum score on each test before they are allowed to complete returns. As this is a volunteer staffed program, there are some limitations on the type of returns that can be prepared by the program. To find a VITA site near you, go to <https://www.irs.gov/individuals/find-a-location-for-free-tax-prep>.

If you decide to complete your tax returns yourself, take your time filling in the forms to avoid mistakes. Double check the return when you have it completed. Check to make sure that all names and social security numbers listed on the return appear exactly as they are shown on your social security card. Review all entries to make sure they are on the correct lines and the amounts entered are correct as it is easy to transpose a number. Also, check to make sure you have entered routing and account numbers correctly for direct deposit of refunds. Mistakes on a return will slow down its processing and delay any refund so pay close attention when completing your return.



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**Office hours for both locations:**

**Monday through Friday**  
**8:30 a.m.—12:00 noon**  
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***Upcoming Programs***

***“Successful Secondhand Shopping &  
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***6:30—8:00 pm***

***February 21 — Nassau Free Library,***

***March 5 — Cairo Public Library***

***Details at [www.ccecolumbiagreene.org](http://www.ccecolumbiagreene.org)***

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**Whose Watching ?**

**By Nancy Reigelsperger, CCE Steuben County**

Have you ever been surprised to see that something you recently purchased or where you have shopped has been popping up on your internet communications? Many online companies collect user’s personal information. Some companies use the data to customize and enhance user experience such as suggesting books or movies you’d like, while others use it to tailor their marketing messages to appeal to people of similar interests. Data brokers collect data about consumers to sell to third-party marketing firms and other companies that use it to target ads and offers.

It’s important that you learn how your information will be used and that you have control over your personal data. When dealing with a company, read their “Privacy Policy” or “Data Use Policy” to see how and when they collect, use or share your personal information. When able, activate the “private browsing” function in your web browser, which allows you to surf the Web without the browser saving information about which sites and places you have visited. Use pop-up blockers to avoid the opening of unwelcome advertising windows.

It is important to keep your sensitive personal data safe from prying eyes. Password should be strong, with at least eight characters and mix of letters, numbers and symbols. Keep passwords secret. Learn about password managers which are a tool that stores all your passwords and requires you to remember only one. Don’t save login information to your computer when asked. Choose security questions that nobody else is likely to know the answers to. Two-factor authentication requires two pieces of information to access the account and is a much stronger protection.

Encryption is a technology that scrambles the electronic information being sent through cyberspace so it’s much more difficult for hackers to track your activities and steal your data. To see if a website you are using is encrypted, look for the “s” which stands for “secure” in the URL (<https://> rather than just <http://>).

Apps are software applications used for mobile devices such as a smartphone or tablet. Many apps depend on the ability to retrieve and share your personal information, such as contacts, location or calendars. Check the settings in the app itself and, if it wants to collect more personal data than you are comfortable with, don’t download it. Review the app’s privacy policy to see if it has one, and if not, choose a different app.

The World Privacy forum has a listing of the top ten “opt outs” consumers should consider doing these top 10 opt outs:

1. National Do Not Call Registry
2. Prescreened offers of credit and insurance
3. DMA opt outs
4. Financial institution opt outs
5. CAN SPAM



6. Credit freeze
7. FERPA (education opt out)
8. Data broker opt outs
9. Internet portal opt outs
10. Advertising opt outs



To see what each of these are and what is involved go to their website [www.worldprivacyforum.org](http://www.worldprivacyforum.org). Playing an active role in your privacy helps ensure that you enjoy a safe and sound digital life.

#### **How to opt out:**

You can get on the Do Not Call List by phone (call *from* the number you want to get opted out) or you can sign up online. We prefer the phone opt out, not the online service. To opt out online you must provide an email address for verification, and your email address will be kept and can be shared with other federal, state, or local agencies “for any regulatory, compliance, or law enforcement purpose.” Your Do Not Call opt out will not expire.

- Opt out by phone: Call 1-888-382-1222

- Opt out by TTY: 1-866-290-4236

- Opt out online: <https://www.donotcall.gov/default.aspx>

- To opt out of pre-recorded telemarketing calls from companies who already have a business relationship with you, you should be able to activate a voice or keypress command to opt out. If the pre-recorded telemarketing call is left on a voice mail service or machine, the message should include a toll-free number to call where you can then use an automated system to opt out immediately.

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### **National Consumer Protection Week is March 4-10, 2018**

Looking to protect yourself from fraud, identity theft, and scams? Maybe you’re wondering about the best way to use credit, how to shop for a used car, or maximize your security online.

The U. S. Federal Trade Commission has information for you during National Consumer Protection Week — which takes place March 4-10, 2018 — and *any* time of the year.

National Consumer Protection Week (NCPW) is a time to help people understand their consumer rights and make well-informed decisions about money. The FTC can assist with information on homes & mortgages, health & fitness, jobs & making money, and privacy, identity and online security.

Many Cooperative Extension associations will be holding workshops and other informational sessions on a variety of these kinds of topics during this week to draw attention to these important matters. In the meantime, visit <http://www.ncpw.gov/> to learn how to get free resource materials, learn about the latest scams and read the latest from consumer protection experts.

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## Staying Warm During a Winter Power Outage

Edited by Theresa Mayhew, CCE Columbia & Greene

The first two weeks in January were pretty frigid and, in many parts of New York State, snow accumulations have been impressive. If you haven't already had to, it's not too late to prepare to stay warm if the power goes out in your winter wonderland. Freezing rain, ice, high winds and snow can topple trees and knock down power lines. Be ready with these power outage preparedness tips:



- Build or restock your emergency preparedness kit. Include a flashlight, batteries, water, food, prescription medication, cash, first aid supplies, and extra clothing, blankets or sleeping bags to stay warm.
- Have alternative charging methods for your phone or any device that requires power.
- If you rely on anything that is battery-operated or power dependent like a medical device, determine a backup plan.
- Locate the manual release lever of your electric garage door opener and know how to operate it.
- Keep your car's gas tank full. Gas stations rely on electricity to power their pumps.
- If you use your car to re-charge devices, do NOT keep the car running in a garage, partially enclosed space, or close to your home. This can lead to carbon monoxide poisoning.
- Close off unused rooms to consolidate and retain heat.
- The power may be out for a prolonged period. Plan to go to another location (the home of a relative or friend, or a public facility) that has heat. Only use generators outside, away from your home and NEVER run a generator inside a home or garage or connect it to your home's electrical system. For more information, visit the [Generator Safety](https://energy.gov) page of the U. S. Department of Energy's website (<https://energy.gov>).

It does not have to be freezing for hypothermia to set in. Hypothermia can occur at temperatures above 40°F. Rain, sweat, or submersion in cold water can cause it. Know the warning signs and what to do if you suspect you or someone you know may be suffering from hypothermia. In adults, those signs are: body temperature below 95 degrees; uncontrollable shivering; exhaustion; confusion; memory loss; disorientation; incoherence; slurred speech; and drowsiness. With infants look for bright red, cold skin and very low energy. If someone is suffering from hypothermia, get medical attention immediately and begin warming the person (by removing wet clothing and drying the person off) until help arrives.



If you must go outside in frigid weather, wear several layers of loose-fitting, lightweight, water-repellent, warm clothing rather than one layer of heavy clothing. Wear mittens, which are warmer than gloves; and cover all of your body. Wear a hat and a scarf, covering your mouth to protect your face and to help prevent loss of body heat.

Visit [Ready.gov](https://ready.gov) for more tips on how to prepare for severe winter weather and to guard against hypothermia.