



- **Good Planning Helps Focus Your Retirement Picture**
- **Designating a Beneficiary for Your Retirement Account**
- **Make an Investment in Financial Education**
- **Cost of Living Adjustment Coming in January**

Vermont Municipal Employees' Retirement System

December 2007

Retiring *TIMES*

Volume 7, Issue 2

There's Life After Work

Will your finances be in place for your retirement years?

Preparing for retirement isn't one-size-fits-all planning. Financial experts estimate the average American will need at least 70 percent of today's income in retirement to maintain their current stand-

ard of living. That raises a lot of personal questions regarding exactly what the perfect retirement picture will look like. And the answers are as diverse as the people asking the questions.

One way to answer these questions is to look at your current lifestyle and the amount of income it requires. Consider how many of your existing expenses you'll still have to pay in retirement. How many new



Photo by Dennis Curran

Above, visitors at Sandbar State Park enjoy a free concert. Vermonters, and most Americans, are living longer and have high hopes for how they will spend their retirement years. However, plans to enjoy "life after work" may become uncertain without a firm plan on how to make your retirement investments last. The State Treasurer's Office recently sponsored several "Save for Retirement Week" activities to urge people to learn more about building retirement resources. Close to 200 people visited retirement information booths at events held in Montpelier and Waterbury. Many of the free resources distributed by the Treasurer's Office are available at www.MoneyEd.Vermont.gov.

**Stop worrying and start figuring.
51 percent of people who examined
their financial futures ended up changing
their retirement plans.**

-- 2006 Employee Benefit Research Institute Survey

expenses might you have—particularly ones associated with your medical care? National human resource specialists estimate that, on average, 20 percent of a retiree's income is spent on health care. If you plan to travel, how many trips would you ideally like to take each year? If you envision spending quality time with your grandchildren that may include entertainment and gifts, what might that cost?

Plan Now, Play Later

Whether you're already retired or planning for future retirement, knowing where you are currently spending your money is a good idea. You cannot accurately determine the financial resources you'll need in the future without knowing what things cost today.

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Make an Investment in Financial Education

Increasingly Complex Financial Systems Require Greater Knowledge and Skill

by Jeb Spaulding, Vermont State Treasurer

Most of us make “management” decisions each day regarding our finances. As you prepare for work, you decide you can afford to eat out that day and so you don’t pack a lunch. As you fill up your car with gas, you quickly decide whether the funds should come out of your checking account or that you’ll pay with a credit card. Throughout the day you evaluate credit offers that come your way through the mail, you decide how much you can spend supporting your child’s school fundraising event, and you select the home heating oil provider that is most affordable to your needs. Just how financially wise these decisions are is directly impacted by the level of knowledge and skills you habitually apply to managing your money. Are you financially literate?

The return on an investment in financial literacy can be very positive. Studies show financial education positively increases knowledge and changes behavior.

There are national trends that suggest too many of us struggle with issues of personal financial literacy. Consider that the nation’s personal savings rate is now at its lowest rate since the Great Depression -- a negative one percent. Household debt as a percentage of income hovers at record levels. The ratio of household debt to personal income has risen from 60 percent of personal income to 100 percent. Too many Americans are spending more money than they bring home in income. When it comes to saving for retirement, most elderly Americans today are relying on Social Security as their major source of income. In this state, the average monthly benefit for a Vermont worker is approximately \$950.

Being “financially literate” means you have the knowledge, skills and habits to successfully manage your money. I believe that empowering every person in the State of Vermont with an understanding of how to plan his or her financial future is one of the best investments we can make. My office recently joined 35 other State Treasurer’s Offices in the country in making a commitment to financial literacy. As individuals increase their understanding of and practice of sound money management skills, the financial well-being of both the individual and the state will improve.

The return on an investment in financial literacy can be very positive. Studies show financial education positively increases knowledge and changes behavior. For example, studies show that individuals who complete homeownership counseling prior to purchasing a home had loan delinquency rates 34 percent lower than those who did not get such training. Households having financial difficulties because they have over-extended themselves experience fewer loan delinquencies and have better credit risk scores after participating in credit education and counseling. Employees who attend training workshops about retirement savings options offered by their employers often increased their participation in the companies’ 401(k) plans.

In advocating for financial literacy, the Treasurer’s Office joins a network of committed Vermonters already working within non-profit, community, governmental and financial institutions statewide. My office recently placed online a new database called the Vermont Financial Education Resource Clearinghouse. The clearinghouse features forty unique listings of Vermont-based organizations that offer free or low-cost instruction and resources. Services are accessible by county to allow people to identify resources in their local area. The clearinghouse may be accessed by going to www.MoneyEd.Vermont.gov, where you will find a new financial literacy section on the State Treasurer’s web site. There also is information there for teachers and community educators on teaching financial concepts; resources for saving for retirement; information on budgeting and managing credit; and a page for parents and kids.

Being “financially literate” has never been more important. As our financial markets become increasingly complex and consumer choices grow, we can quickly find ourselves off-track financially as we make money management decisions not in our best interest. It’s time to make an investment in financial education. I hope you’ll take the time to assess your personal skills and knowledge and then take advantage of the resources available to you. It’s one investment in time that’s guaranteed to bring you a positive return.



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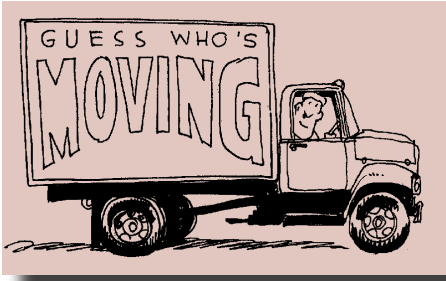
Editor: Lisa Helme



UPDATES FROM THE RETIREMENT DIVISION: A word on taxes, COLAs & address changes

Address Changes in Writing, Please!

This is the time of year that we like to remind our “snow birds” that all address changes need to be received in writing. You need to send us a written address change when you leave Vermont and again when you return in the spring or summer. Written address changes received by the 15th of the month will be processed for that month.



Plans Call for Launch of Active Member Phase in Feb.



The Vermont Retirement Division is now testing the State's new Vermont Pension Administration System (VPAS). The new software system will replace the current pension data management system that's been in place for

more than 25 years. VPAS features a fully integrated browser-based pension system. The new system will allow members access to their information via the web. It's estimated that web-based access will be available early in 2009.

"During this peak implementation period, retirement division staff will work to balance member requests for information with the VPAS phase-in."

— Marge Sweeney, Retirement Project Manager

Work now underway includes a “cleaning” of the data to ensure accuracy and the performance of the new system. The first phase of a two-phased approach to install the pension software is expected to “go live” this February. Phase one, the active members phase, involves the activities dealing with a member prior to retirement and includes employer reporting, annual statements, estimates and retirement planning, and purchases of service credit. The second phase, the retired member phase, deals with the activities of members once retired and includes pension payments, tax withholdings, and insurance deductions. The benefit phase is expected to “go live” in January 2009.

Retirement division staff began training on the system in November. Next, staff will operationally test VPAS using a wide-range of user scenarios. Training for payroll officers for the Municipal and Teachers' systems will begin in February and March of 2008.

“During this peak implementation period, retirement division staff will work to balance member requests for information with the VPAS phase-in,” said Marge Sweeney, Retirement Project Manager. “Staff will prioritize requests for information based on the time urgency of the need, such as members closest to filing for retirement. Division staff will do their best to respond in a timely fashion.”

Tax Withholdings on Retirement

Most of your retirement income from the Vermont Retirement Systems (VRS) is taxable, but an exclusion ratio will be applied so that a specified amount will be excluded from tax if you made contributions prior to July 1, 1998 on an after-tax basis. This exclusion ratio is based on the total after-tax contributions that you made during employment, or from a pre-tax purchase of service credit prior to retirement. When you retired, you were provided with specific information regarding the taxability of your benefit. In most cases, once you have received the total amount of the contributions you paid into VRS while you were working, your retirement benefit will become all taxable. While you were working, you received a W-2 form from your employer reporting your salary earned for that year. As a retired member, you will receive a 1099-R tax form from VRS to be used in preparing your income tax return. VRS will mail your 1099-R form by the end of January of each year. Whether you should have taxes withheld depends upon your personal financial situation. Some retirees do not have monthly deductions taken from their monthly retirement income because they make quarterly estimated tax payments directly to the IRS. You have the option of having federal and Vermont state income taxes withheld from your monthly benefit payment. To estimate your federal income tax withholding, please refer to the “MONTHLY PAY-ROLL PERIOD” tables in the IRS Federal Tax Guide. At the time of your retirement, VRS had you complete a “Form W-4P” (Withholding Certificate for Pension or Annuity Payments). You may change your tax withholding election at any time, and as often as you wish; simply complete a new “Form W-4P”. Changes in tax withholding must be received in the VRS office by the 15th of the month to be effective for the next month's benefit payment. If you are satisfied with your current withholding, no action is required. To change your withholding, complete a Withholding for Pension Payments form (IRS W-4P). You must indicate the number of withholding allowances and your marital status on the form. Under current law, you cannot designate a specific dollar amount to be withheld. However, you can designate additional amounts to be withheld. Please note that questions about the amount of taxes to withhold or the need for tax deduction should be directed to a professional tax consultant.



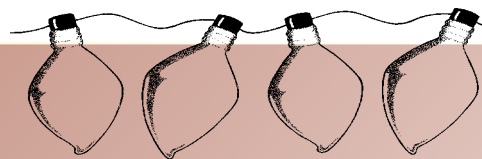
Cost of Living Adjustment Effective January 2008

Retirees from Group A, B, C and D will receive a COLA (Cost-of-Living Adjustment) in January of 1.35%. To receive the COLA, you must have received at least 12 pension checks. If you have not yet received your first 12 pension checks, you will not receive a COLA until January of 2009. Retirees who retired under an early retirement are not eligible for a COLA until the January following attainment of normal retirement age.



Director's Corner

by Cynthia Webster, Director of Retirement Policy & Outreach



I have used this space in the last several newsletters to provide you with an update on the many changes that have been occurring in the Retirement Division. Because Project Manager Marge Sweeney has written an article for this newsletter on the status of VPAS, our new pension system project, I will take this opportunity to write about another subject that I believe is of the utmost importance to both active and retired members.

BENEFICIARY DESIGNATIONS

Fact – Of the 8,914 active municipal members, only 4,149 have designated a beneficiary(ies) on their retirement account. That leaves 4,765 with NO beneficiary listed. If you are an active member, it is very important to have a current and appropriate beneficiary designated on your retirement account. The reason for this is two-fold:

1. The retirement office is holding money on your behalf. As a contributory member, you make contributions each pay period into your retirement account. Your contributions earn annual interest at the rate of 5.0%. If you should die, this money will be paid to your primary beneficiary(ies). If you do not have a beneficiary designated, the money will be paid to your estate, which must be probated before it will get to your loved ones.
2. In lieu of a return of your contribution balance, there is a survivorship benefit available for your designated primary beneficiary if you have a minimum of 5 years of service. This is an extremely valuable benefit that could provide an income stream to your spouse or civil union partner in the event of your death while still actively employed.



If you have not already done so, I strongly recommend that you take the time to ensure your designated beneficiary is up-to-date. If you are married with children, the ideal designation is your spouse as your primary, and your children as your contingents. Although you may name anyone you wish as your beneficiary, the survivorship benefit is only payable to a dependent designated beneficiary. If your beneficiary is not a dependent, a lump sum payment of your contributions with accumulated interest would be made.

If you are unsure who you have as your designated beneficiary, or whether you have established a beneficiary, please review your Annual Benefit Statement that was mailed during the latter part of October. The statement will reflect your primary beneficiary only. If the statement reflects ESTATE, you do not have a designated beneficiary on file (beneficiary forms filed after June 30, 2006, would not be reflected on the Annual Benefit Statement).

If you are a retired member, it is still important to keep your beneficiary updated as circumstances change. You were required to establish a beneficiary at the time you retired, regardless of the option you selected. If you elected the Maximum Option, you may change your beneficiary whenever you choose. If you elected one of the Survivorship Options, you cannot change your beneficiary unless that beneficiary dies. At that time, you may designate a new beneficiary to receive the proportionate amount of your benefit payable for the month in which your death occurs. You may not designate a new beneficiary to receive the survivorship option after your death. Please contact our office at 1-800-642-3191 or 828-2305 if you need further information, or would like a form to update your beneficiary.

(Health Savings Accounts, Continued)

allows you to seek reimbursement for your out-of-pocket medical expenses and your medical, vision, dental and long-term care premiums. You must pay for the medical expenses first, then seek reimbursement for your costs from your RHS account.

Q. Whom should I establish as my beneficiary on the RHS account?

A. A spouse is the only acceptable beneficiary on the RHS plan. If you should die, the money may be passed along to your spouse, but no one else. If you are not married, any remaining balance in your account will revert back to the Municipal System at your death. If you are married, it is important to designate your spouse as your beneficiary because the money in your account may be used for medical expenses for both you and your spouse after you retire.

Q. Who handles medical benefit claims?

A. Medical benefit claims processing and payment will be handled

by Meritain Health, ICMA-RC's third-party claims administrator. Claim forms may be obtained by calling IMCA-RC at 1-800-669-7400 or Meritain at 1-888-587-9441. You also may visit ICMA-RC's web site at the following address: www.icmarc.org/vmersrhs for claim forms and instructions, as well as more complete information about the plan.

Q. Whom should I contact if I have questions about the RHS?

A. Contact Meritain Health at 1-888-587-9441 for claim-related issues. Contact ICMA-RC at 1-800-669-7400 to change your personal data, for questions regarding your quarterly account statement, or for all account issues that are not claims-related. Contact Cynthia Webster at 1-800-642-3191 (within Vermont only) or 802-828-2302 for all other questions relating to the RHS plan specifics such as benefit eligibility, design and distributions.

(Retirement Planning, Continued)

If you don't have a budget or spending plan in place, it's time to create one. A simple budget will list all of your monthly recurring bills such as your mortgage or rent payment, car payment, and utility bills. Your budget should include estimates of monthly expenses for items where costs can vary such as food, clothing and gas for the car. Your budget also must include your monthly income. If you have questions about drafting a budget or tracking monthly expenses, the Treasurer's Office has a new financial literacy web site. You may get more information by going to www.MoneyEd.Vermont.gov.

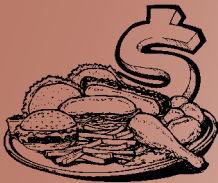
Now that you have an idea of what it costs to maintain your current standard of living, you need to consider how these expenses might change. One big consideration is the impact of inflation. Inflation refers to the anticipated rise in the cost of goods and services, particularly as it relates to your income. If the cost of buying a car goes up 5 percent, your wages would also need to rise 5 percent to keep the same level of purchasing power you had before prices rose. Consider the cost of inflation on food. In the first four months of 2007, food inflation was at 6.7 percent. At that rate, a one dollar loaf of bread would nearly double in 10 years to cost \$1.91. That may not seem like a big deal, but if you examine your total yearly expense for food, it can add up. The example below indicates how much you might spend on food for two people over a 15-year period.

\$5 a meal X two people X three meals a day X 365 days a year

= \$10,950

Spend 15 years in retirement

= \$164,250 for food!



I'm Already Retired--What Are My Options?

The average life expectancy for someone who is 65 years old today is now 17.5 years--six years longer than it was in 1935. A major challenge for current retirees is making sure the income they do have lasts throughout their lifetime. A growing number of retirees are opting to "semi-retire" and continue working part-time. Earning new wage income allows you to reduce the amount of money you need to withdraw from retirement investments to supplement Social Security and a pension. Assume someone is 65 years old and is about to retire and collect Social Security. The person has saved \$100,000 and needs \$24,000 a year to live on and will receive \$12,000 from a small pension and Social Security. This means the retiree will need to withdraw \$12,000 from retirement savings each year. If the individual withdraws \$12,000 each year, by age 75 the retiree will have less than \$20,000 in savings and be in danger of outliving his or her investments.

In their guidebook for late savers, the National Endowment for Financial Education suggests a safer option is to withdraw \$4,000 a year, representing 4 percent of the \$100,000 nest egg, and make up the difference through self-employment. A number of recent studies suggest that retirees should not annually withdraw more than 4 to 4.5 percent of their base investment. If the semi-retired worker earns a higher rate of return than 4 percent on the nest egg, the account balance will continue to grow and provide a cushion against inflation. Assuming that half the investment is in stocks and the retiree only withdraws 4 percent of the funds, there has never been a 25-year period since



Despite persistent rains, close to 100 people stopped by a "Save for Retirement Week" booth in Montpelier in late October. Above, Retirement Specialist Tina Kaweck and Great-West Retirement Representative Chip Sanville prepare to speak with visitors.

1925 when an investor would have run out of money.

Current retirees may also find additional income by making sure they are fully leveraging all assets. For example, if you own your own home you might consider accepting a boarder who will pay you monthly rent. Reverse mortgages also can help you convert home equity into spendable income without having to move. A reverse mortgage is a special type of home loan that allows a homeowner to convert a portion of the equity in the home into cash. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) offers free information and counseling for people interested in evaluating this option.

It Pays To Save

Whether you have ten, twenty or thirty years until your retirement, putting money away in an interest-bearing investment will help your money grow. Interest is the money you are paid by a bank or financial institution for the use of your deposited money, as in a savings account. Compound interest allows you to earn interest payment on interest. For example, if you earn \$10 in interest on a \$100 investment, your next interest payment will be calculated based on a \$110 base. The more money you invest, the more promising it becomes. If you save \$4,000 a year and earn 7 percent in interest, within five years your investment will grow to \$23,003. In 15 years, your investment will grow to \$100,516 and after 25 years you would have more than \$250,000.

In planning for your retirement, make sure you are taking advantage of all retirement savings opportunities through your workplace. The State offers employees a 457 Deferred Compensation Plan that enables participants to reduce their taxable income and grow additional funds for retirement. Be aware of what your Social Security benefit may be at retirement and, if you are within two years of retiring, consult with a retirement specialist in the State Treasurer's Office to determine what your monthly benefit might be.

The State Treasurer's Office also has a free packet of retirement planning material available to anyone wanting more information on saving for retirement. You may request the materials on-line through the Treasurer's Office web page on "Saving for Retirement" or call 1-800-642-3191 to have a packet sent to you. By planning for your future now, you will hopefully have fewer unanswered questions unexpectedly arising to spoil your unique retirement picture.

Vermont Municipal Employees' Retirement System

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Have a
Fun-Filled Holiday!

Retiree Health Savings Deposits Now Available for Medical Expenses

The new VantageCare Retirement Health Savings (RHS) Plan that was established on July 1, 2007, has quickly proven to be a great help to many retirees who have sought reimbursement of burdensome medical expenses.

All active and retired members of the Municipal Retirement System who had a minimum of five years of contributory service as of June 30, 2006, received a deposit into their newly established RHS plan on July 2, 2007. The money that was deposited represented a re-allocation of employer contributions that the Municipal Board determined could be paid back to members and retirees through the RHS accounts. This re-allocation was possible due to a surplus that was created as a result of very favorable investment returns on the assets in the system.

"It is important to stress that there is no guarantee that future deposits will be made into the RHS accounts," said Cynthia Webster, Treasurer's Office Director of Retirement Policy and Outreach. "The Municipal Board will review the funding level and health of the system on an annual basis and make a determination whether there is a surplus sufficient to make another distribution."

Below are some of the most commonly asked questions the the Treasurer's Office has received over the past few months:

Q. Where will my RHS assets be invested?

A. Your money is invested in a Vantagepoint age-based Milestone Fund through ICMA-RC.

Q. When may I access the money in my RHS account?

A. You may use the money for medical reimbursements at any time after you are retired and receiving a monthly pension from the Municipal Retirement System. Individuals who were already retired when the RHS accounts were established in July had immediate access to the funds. It is important to clarify that simply separating from active employment does NOT give you

access to the funds. You must be actually receiving a monthly retirement benefit from the Municipal System.

Q. Can I lose the money in the RHS account?

A. Yes. If you separate from service prior to retirement and withdraw your contributions plus interest from the Municipal System, all funds in your RHS account will be forfeited back to the system.

Q. Is the RHS an insurance plan?

A. NO, absolutely not. It is a health benefit savings plan that

(continued pg. 4)

